The Hawk's View

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The Hawk's View

by Raliena

Summary

Clint knows several facts to be true:
1. He will always look out for those who are his.
2. Steve loves Tony.
3. Tony loves Steve.
4. Tony is a civilian.
5. Iron Man is a villain.

But just because something is true does not mean it is the whole truth, the complete truth and nothing but the truth.
He doesn't know that yet.

Notes

Disclaimer - You recognise it, I don't own it.

- Translation into Español available: The Hawk's View TRADUCCIÓN by YokoHasagagua

Chapter 1: Teaser

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't an unusual situation in theory. A SHIELD STRIKE teams fighting a Supervillain. It was a situation that had happened many times before.

However this time it *was* different. Because this time it was taking place on the Helicarrier as it floated in the sky.

It was a situation that should never have been able to happen. The Helicarrier was currently utilising its invisibility mood. Yet the Supervillain had had no trouble in locating and attacking the floating fortress.

This particular Supervillain, on the other hand, was known for being quite technologically advanced. So if anyone would have been able to track them, it would probably have been him. And it was something that the techs would have to investigate later.

The STRIKE team were hard pressed to keep the Supervillain back. He was being far more intent in his attacks than he had ever been before. Far more reckless in his attacks.

One of the doors to the Helicarrier opened; one of the Avengers stepped out. A large circular shield on his arm, clearly displayed.

Seemingly without fear of an attack, he walked across the carrier's deck towards the Supervillain.

"I know you can hear me." He called out.

There was no response. There was no change in the Villain's attack.

“I know you can.” The Avenger repeated, “And I know why you’re doing this.”

A blast was fired, coming dangerously close to the Avenger. But it never touched him. And he didn’t even flinch.

“I know.” The Avenger stated once again, “I get it. And I’m sorry. I’m so, so *sorry*! I’m sorry that we drove you to this. I’m sorry that we lied to you. And above all…”

He moved so that the shield was resting on the ground, his hands positioned on top keeping it upright.

“I’m sorry that Captain America is dead.” Hawkeye addressed Iron Man.

Chapter End Notes

My NaNoWriMo project for 2014. Story is still in process. Update every Saturday, until I finish the blasted thing.

The first chapter was the scene that began everything for me. Unfortunately by the time I finished 50,000 I still hadn't reached that scene.

I'll tell you when I do.

Chapter 2: Chapter 1

If you asked Hawkeye who his best friend was, he wouldn't even have to think to answer. And his answer would be Agent Coulson.

If you asked Clint the same question, he still wouldn't have to think about it. The answer would be Phil.

If you asked who was his best friend that he wasn't practically married to the answer would either be the Black Widow or Natasha, depending on who you were asking.

However if you asked him who his best male friend, whom he wasn't basically married to, was, then you would spot a difference.

For Hawkeye it was Captain America.

But Clint was best friends with Tony.

If you had told Clint Barton ten years ago that he would be friends with Tony Stark, he would have laughed at you. He would have declared it to be impossible.

A circus brat doesn't get to make friends with a billionaire.

But somehow it had happened.

Thinking back, Clint could see the logical progression of events. But it still amazed him every time he stopped to think about it.

It all started with SHIELD. That was where everything in Clint's previously horrible little life started going right.

Because of SHIELD he met Agent Coulson. Who became Coulson. Who became Phil. Who became *everything*.

Because of SHEILD he met the Black Widow. Who became Romanov. Who became Natasha. Who became Tasha.

Because of SHEILD he met Captain America. Who became Rogers. Who became Steve. Who became Cap.

Oh, there had been some bad moments. Fights where the blows had come closer to being final that Clint was comfortable with. Situations where he hadn't believed that *any* of them would come out alive.

And sure, Clint wasn't too happy about having to go fight Supervillains and foil their insane little plans virtually every week (if he was lucky).

But because of that the Avengers had formed. Because of Loki.

Sure, Fury had been batting the idea around for a while. Iron Man had become a rather large pain in their backsides. Fury's solution had been to draft a team to solely deal with him. It had consisted of the Black Widow, Hawkeye and Captain America. Agent Coulson had been their Handler. Other members of SHIELD had been co-opted as and when needed.

But after Loki… After the Battle of New York, Fury had made an effort to reach out to other potential heroes. They had become the Avengers.

However that was later. Clint had first met Tony before Loki.

Clint knew something was up with Steve. It wasn't big. And it wasn't obvious. But Clint was famous for his eyes.

Though it took Clint a while to put his finger on exactly what was different. It was only after a long period of unnoticed observation (read: vent spying) that he finally placed it.

Steve wasn't as lost.

He was better with technology. He was getting about half, if not more, of the cultural references. And not just the recent ones either. He'd made a comment about "Red-Shirts" that caused Clint to do a double take.

Something was up. There was no way that Steve, working on his own, would get to Star Trek. He would be more likely to concentrate on political and social changes, possibly the legal changes. Gather information about the geopolitical climate and the various wars that had occurred since his freezing.

Pop culture and particularly things such as Star Trek and other science fiction, Clint wouldn't have expected them to even be on Steve's radar at the moment.

His curiosity pricked Clint decided to follow Steve. Outside of SHIELD.

Technically a breach of privacy, but Clint had it mentally classified under "Protection of Team" and "Observation of Situation". Both technically in his job description.

Besides Agent Coulson had noted down in his last eval that he was highly protective of those he deemed *his*.

So Clint watched as Steve went to Central Park on his day off. The Super-Soldier found a quiet bench and sat down. It was clear that he intended to do some sketching as he pulled both a sketchpad and some pencils out of his bag.

Clint settled himself into a more comfortable position in the tree he had chosen for his nest.

However after about an hour he noticed a lean figure approaching the Captain. Automatically he assessed them. Dark trousers; dark trainers; dark baseball cap; dark hoodie with a zip down the front, hood *up*; shades on, but they weren't dark enough to obscure his eyes at a close distance; a dark goatee was visible, but no more of his face, at least to Clint. He didn't *look* dangerous. But he certainly looked suspicious.

Clint tensed. He knew that at the range he was he could put the man down or kill him. Both with his preferred bow or a gun. Without touching anyone else at all.

The problem would be in the panic that the actions would cause. A gunshot would cause a stamped. And although an arrow would take longer to cause the panic, it still would cause it.

Also he'd had to leave his bow behind. It was hard to carry a quiver discretely.

Clint didn't move.

Until there was a confirmed threat he didn't dare. Not until Steve was unable to deal with it himself.

However he watched as the man pulled his hands out his pockets. A hand reached up and removed the shades.

A concealed weapon? Conceivable. But doubtful that it would be strong enough to take down Captain America. Unless it was poisoned. But that would imply that the man, or whoever had sent him, knew who to target.

Clint watched as the man stopped behind Steve and laid an arm, complete with shades over Steve's shoulders.

Clint's brain had to reboot as he tried to take in what he saw.

Steve had lain down his drawing, lifting his arm to pull down the hood and steal the baseball cap, before settling round the neck of the man. He'd turned his face upward to brush cheeks with the man.

Clint got the feeling, even from the distance he was, that Steve would rather have kissed the man.

And didn't that just cause the brain to fumble? Captain America was gay? Or was he bi?

Clint didn't know. And to be perfectly blunt he didn't care.

What he cared about were the intentions of the stranger. Though it was very clear that he wasn't a stranger to Steve.

Steve pulled the cap onto his own head (after adjusting it), before packing up his sketching equipment into a rucksack that he pulled onto his back.

Then the pair of them headed off.

Clint followed.

He had to admit that the two of them were incredibly sweet, from what he could see. He watched as Steve's hand reached out towards the other. But always retreated before he made contact. As if he were shy.

Or was it a sign that something wasn't quite right?

Clint didn't know for sure. But he would be keeping an eye on that. He was *not* going to let Steve get into an abusive relationship. Because while most would think that would be impossible, you didn't have to be stronger to abuse someone.

It was a fair walk and a subway trip to wherever they were going and Clint shadowed discretely.

He was a little surprised at the destination. A small independent movie theatre. One of the ones with only one screen that showed old movies rather than the most recent blockbusters.

The stranger paid for their tickets, while Steve brought the popcorn.

Clint brought a ticket and slipped into the back of the theatre. Knowing that the darkness would keep him hidden.

He didn't even notice what was being shown, until the film started.

It wasn't something he recognised, being released during or just before his less than stella childhood. He'd heard it was a cult classic, but Sci-Fi wasn't really his genre.

Though he was clearly have to readjust his views on the genre. Because despite his intentions to stay focused on Steve and the stranger, he was drawn into the film.

Who knew that Sci-Fi could be so *funny*?

It didn't escape his notice that about a third of the way into the film the stranger turned so that his back was towards Steve. Using the Super-Solider as a pillow or cushion. Steve turned

slightly to make the man more comfortable and gently wrapped an arm around his waist. The other hand regularly raided the popcorn.

Despite the fact that Clint had never pictured the scene to involve another man, *this* was something that Clint had been hoping would occur. Steve was finding roots in the modern day.

Though Natasha would be upset that she'd missed the signs leaning towards this. What with all the suggestions of suitable dates she'd been throwing at Steve, almost desperate for the man to find a life outside of work.

Clint hoped that the other man wasn't evil, a criminal or leading Steve on. Particularly given he did have to admit that what little he had seen of the man's face was annoyingly familiar. And while he could lip-read, that was only when he could see *faces*. They'd been turned away from him most of the time.

After the film finished, they moved to leave the theatre. Clint hung back watching how Steve checked his phone and declared that he had an emergency at work he had to attend to. The man looked disappointed, but Steve smiled sadly and looked suitably upset about the change in plans.

The man moved closer and gently knocked his forehead against Steve's, rising on his toes to do so. Then with a quick hand he stole back his baseball cap, plopped it on his own head, pulled up his hood and slipped his shades on.

Then he was swallowed by the crowd.

"Hello Clint." Steve sighed without turning around, his voice pitched at the *exact* volume required to carry to Clint's ears and no further, which was quite impressive, given Clint's compromised hearing.

"Cap." Clint nodded as he stepped forward to stand next to the soldier, "How did you know? When did you know?"

"When I heard your laugh in the film."

“Everyone was laughing.” Clint protested, “Brian Blessed is comedy gold. And ‘I love you but we only have fourteen hours to save the Earth’? You couldn’t have picked me out.”

“It’s a very distinctive laugh.” Steve replied with a strange look on his face.

“Who is he?” Clint pressed lightly, “How’d you meet?”

“Not here.” Steve was firm.

“Your place?” Clint asked rhetorically.

They both knew it was a rhetorical question. Clint didn’t *have* a place of his own. He officially lived in SHIELD barracks. Unofficially he lived at Phil’s.

Neither was a suitable place for this discussion. And having it in a public place didn’t sit right with Clint.

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Clint let Steve sit in silence for a good few minutes. Allowing the Captain to arrange his thoughts.

“His name’s Tony.” Steve supplied, “We met in Central Park.”

“He approached you?” Clint asked.

“I approached him.” Steve shook his head, “I spotted him first. A couple of times. He was usually sitting in an out of the way place. He intrigued me.”

“Why?” Clint frowned.

Steve paused for a moment. Then he turned and pulled out an older sketchbook. Flicking through it quickly, he found the page he wanted and pushed it towards Clint.

Clint looked down at the image captured for eternity on the sheet. The man was sitting down, curled up. His legs pulled up to his chest. His arms were wrapped around his knees, hands

clutching the opposite elbows. His chin wasn't quite resting on his knees. His shoulders were raised upwards, tense. His whole posture screamed fear. But the man's face… It wasn't very clear behind the baseball cap, hoodie and shades… But Clint could see determination, defiance, strength. It was a wonderful contrast of contradictions.

"That was the first time I drew him." Steve stated, "But I'd seen him a few times before. Always in passing. I was running."

"Does he always wear the cap and the hood and the shades?

"Pretty much." Steve agreed, "Unless he's with a friend. He calls them his Shield. When he's with someone he trusts he doesn't seem to need them."

"So you approached him?"

"Not at first. I watched him. He seemed to be screaming 'don't touch me' silently all the time. I was intrigued, but didn't want to interfere. I think it was the fifth time I sketched him when he wasn't just sitting. He was up a tree. There was a cat. Just a kitten. He'd rigged up a crazy contraption to get the kitten down. I mean it was made up of anything he could get his hands on. Just to get that kitten down. The little boy was so happy. And Tony just shrugged it off, as if it were nothing. But wouldn't let him touch him."

"That's when you approached him."

"No." Steve shook his head. "I didn't. Didn't dare. I've never been all that good at approaching people. At least not people I'm interested in. All my dates? Were double dates that Bucky found for me. Or the one date that the Captain America Tour gave me. Just to improve the image."

"So what changed?"

"A few days later, he was sitting near one of the lakes. Some teenagers seemed to think it would be funny to push him in. He panicked. I mean *really* panicked. I haven't seen anyone react like that since Bucky…"

"Since Bucky what?"

"You know I went after Bucky when he was a prisoner of Hydra. I don't know what they did to him. He never spoke of it. We had to go through medical checks. Bucky… Lost it. They tried to pull him from the Commandos. I fought for him. They couldn't risk upsetting me at the time. Bucky was fine, apart from one thing… He couldn't go in a lab."

"And this was the same?"

"Yes." Steve agreed, "Only worse. Because he didn't know me. He didn't know he could trust me. I hadn't pulled him out of his own personal hell. He fought me just as hard as he fought the water. He was yelling. I've no idea what. Something foreign. Middle Eastern, I think. I managed to calm him down."

“He got a few hits in though?”

“More than a few. He’s quite a fighter when he’s pressed. A bit frantic. But he knows what he’s doing. Knows how to use what he’s got to his advantage. He apologised afterwards. I said if he really wanted to apologise, he’d let me take him for coffee.”

“Smooth.” Clint was slightly proud, it looked like Natasha’s lessons/lectures had paid off.

“It worked.” Steve smiled shyly, “We’ve been almost dating since then.”

“*Almost*?” Clint raised an eyebrow.

“Neither of us have actually *said* it.” Steve shrugged, “But we see each other nearly every other day. Coffee. Movies. Nights on the sofa.”

“And the fact you don’t really touch him?”

“You saw that?”

“Kinda my thing.”

“He flinches.” Steve spoke as if revealing a confidence, “If he doesn’t see the touch coming, he flinches. And sometimes he goes somewhere inside his head. Somewhere I can’t reach him. However, if he touches me first and he’s still touching me, he doesn’t go anywhere. So I don’t touch him first. It scares me when he goes to that other place in his head.”

“Like when he went in the water?”

“No. He fights when he’s in the water. He doesn’t fight when he goes to that place inside his head. It’s like he’s too scared to. I don’t know what happened. But someone hurt him badly. However he isn’t broken. He isn’t cowed. He’s a fighter and he’s strong.”

“How long?”

“Couple of months.” Steve replied.

“Surprised I haven’t heard anything.” Clint blinked, “Phil would have been so shocked at this. He’s got a better poker face than I thought.”

“I haven’t told him.”

“You told Fury? Or Hill?”

“You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“That’s not protocol.” Clint breathed, “We’re meant to inform SHIELD the *minute* we get involved with a civilian. Phil should have been your first call. You broke protocol? *You*!

Captain America? You're all rules and regulations. You led a team of the best men the Allied Forces could find."

"I led the Howling Commandos." Steve argued, "Colonel Phillips said they'd put together a team of the best men. I overrode them. Chose some of the men I rescued, because I knew I could trust them. No one objected because they couldn't afford the political fall-out. I was Captain America. I had just rescued over two hundred men. By going *against* orders. I was a glorified showgirl. A performing monkey. I rebelled to go after Bucky. A lot of the stories that have sprung up about me… They're just that… Stories. Spun at the time, or after the fact. It doesn't change the fact that I broke orders. I lied four times to try and enrol in the Military. The unit was called the Howling Commandos. That's not a name you give a bunch of men who follow rules and regulations and orders. They thought we were going to die on the first mission. Why would *anyone* think I was the perfect soldier?"

"Because you were chosen for Project Rebirth."

"I wasn't chosen because I was a perfect soldier. I was chosen because I was a good man."

"What's Tony's surname?" Clint placed his hand over his face, "I'll try and talk Phil into covering for you."

"Stark."

"What?" Clint blinked and stared at Steve.

"His name's Tony Stark. I think he's related to Howard, but I've never asked."

"Tony Stark." Clint breathed, "Of all the people in the *world* you find Tony Stark."

"What have I missed?" Steve frowned.

"Tony's Howard's son." Clint explained, "He disappeared off the grid a few years ago. There was a big thing about it. I can't remember what happened, but I know SHIELD has a file on him."

"I don't want to read it." Steve was firm, "Any secrets he has, I want him to tell me."

"I'll read it and see if there's anything you need to know." Clint offered, "I'll also see if I can get Phil to cover for you."

"What will it cost me?" Steve asked quietly.

It wasn't an unfair question, Clint had to concede. He and Natasha often remarked about who owed who. Most people would assume that they were serious, but it was their way of reassuring each other that they were alright.

“Introduce us?” Clint asked, “I’ll be a co-worker. And best introduce Phil and Tasha as well. Just in case we have a problem. I want to check him out. You won’t know, but Tony had a reputation.”

“Sounds fair.” Steve agreed, “But I don’t care about his reputation. That was the past.”

“I just don’t want it to be your future.”

Chapter 3: Chapter 2

Clint didn't bother asking for permission to access the Stark Files. He just sneaked in and accessed the files he wanted.

All the information about Anthony Stark he could ever want. The circuit board at age four. The engine at age six. The graduation summa cum laude at age seventeen from MIT. The death of his parents at twenty. His succession to CEO of Stark Industries when he turned twenty one that same year.

The list of all those who had slept with Stark (a very long list with more than a few names Clint recognised). The list of all those who had turned him down (admittedly a very much smaller list, topped by Virginia Potts).

The key thing from those lists that Clint noted was that every name was female.

There also wasn't a list of people that Stark had had a proper relationship with. Just a note that there *was* no one Stark had ever had more than a one-night stand with.

Clint flipped past psychological analyses that used words such as narcissism, alcoholic, manipulative, ADHD, sociopath, psychopath and autism. It seemed that no two psychologists could agree on what was wrong with Stark. Only that there *was* something wrong with him.

Clint had never put much stock in psychological analysis anyway. Particularly ones done, like these were, without the expert never meeting the subject.

The file that caused Clint to slow down was the Afghanistan file. It was frustratingly thin in the important areas. Stark had been a prisoner of a terrorist organisation, later identified as the Ten Rings, for three months. The file should have been full of facts and sketches and interviews and photographs.

And there was lots of information about how the Ten Rings had ambushed the convoy with Stark in it. There were profiles on each of the soldiers involved in the convoy and what happened to them. There were pictures taken from one of the dead soldiers' camera, which showed Stark clearly having a good time. There was information on why Stark was in Afghanistan in the first place. There was intel about how Stark was found wandering the desert all alone and half dead from exposure. There were even hospital photos taken of Stark and a report that stated that Stark had refused any and all medical treatment by anyone other than Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, who had simply reported that Stark had some scarring in the chest region, probably due to the explosion. There were no photos of the scars. In fact all the hospital photos showed Stark always dressed in a t-shirt and trousers.

But of the actual time spent in captivity, there was virtually nothing. Just a simple statement by Stark:

"They wanted me to build them a weapon. I refused. They didn't like that. I escaped. They're all dead."

Attempts to back trace Stark's escape had failed. SHIELD still had no idea where the man had been kept. And he had refused all further interviews. Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes had been equally tight lipped, saying that Stark had told him very little and he did not want to breach the confidence of a friend. Any further attempts to question the Lieutenant Colonel had met with abject failure as the man proved to have a greater loyalty to his friend than to the orders he was given. Rhodes had stated that the military had no right to hold Stark, nor to force him to talk. Even at one point arguing that the First Amendment also allowed a man to *not* speak should he so chose to.

Rhodes, Clint decided, was a damn good friend.

There was a brief statement about how, upon his return, Stark had declared his intentions to stop manufacturing weapons.

After that there was a file about how an injunction was filed against Stark by his own company. By Obadiah Stane. So that Stane gained control of Stark Industries.

There was a report on the Third Annual Benefit for the Firefighters' Family Fund. A notation that Agent Coulson had attempted to interview Stark further about his captivity, but been

brushed off. There was a record that a reporter, Christine Everhart, spoke with Stark and showed him some photographs, but she had clammed up and refused to repeat what she had said. The photographs had been taken by Stark, and as far as SHIELD could tell Everhart had no other copies of them.

Stark had left the benefit unexpectedly, causing many rumours to run wild in the media.

However the next day, Stark had sent a letter to every media outlet in the world.

"To anyone interested,

"My name is Tony Stark. Until recently I believed myself to be a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist. I believed I knew all about the world. I also believed myself to be untouchable when it came to the dangers of the world.

"I was wrong. There are dangers out in this world. Dangers that our military face every day. Dangers that can come when you least expect it. Dangers that can scar.

"My treatment at the hands of the terrorists who killed me was not kind, nor was it meant to be. However I regret the loss of the lives of those men and women who tried to protect me more than the treatment I endured.

"I, at least, can live with my scars. Both of the flesh and my mind. They do not have such an opportunity. My thanks goes towards them for their care and attempt. I cannot say that I can grieve for them as their families do. However I mourn their passing.

"However this letter is not to discuss what has happened. It is to explain what will happen.

"My eye opening experience has left me unable to continue in my previous manner. It has left me unable to continue in my career as I have before. I am suffering from PTSD. A

scientist with the problems I have runs the risk of having an accident in the lab. An accident could cost me my life, or worse the lives of others. I will not chance it.

"I have come to the realization that I cannot continue in the R&D department of SI. I do not currently have the stability of mind to act as the CEO. I also cannot risk a violent attack in public. As such this is my declaration of my temporary retirement from my position in SI and from public life, until such time as I can manage my condition better.

"I hope that in the future I can return to my previous life. However I understand that there is no guarantee of this.

"I am a man who has everything and nothing. I am going to find something. Hopefully myself.

"Tony Stark"

After that, Tony seemed to go off the grid. SHEILD had no confirmed records of his presence anywhere. There were rumours and unconfirmed sightings, mainly based around California, Massachusetts and Italy.

And to think that Tony had been living in New York for a good while without SHEILD realizing.

Though Clint wasn't really surprised. Tony had a reputation for being unpredictable. Also for being a genius. Hiding his tracks would be an easy task. False ids, bank transfers and computer records would be easy for him.

Clint crept away from the records room. He had a lot of information to turn over. Facts that he hadn't known before. Facts that he'd suspected from the media.

However the retirement was something he hadn't known before. Though judging by the time it had gone out, he'd been on a particularly bad mission in Nepal at the time. With the

mission and the recovery period from his injuries, there was no surprise that all the fervour had died down by the time he had started to look at the media again.

Clint also had a practice of not fully trusting reports and analyses. Not after he'd had a *disaster* of a mission, when every report that SHEILD had was wrong. Oh, there'd been legitimate reasons for the reports to be so off. But Clint had nearly lost every teammate.

He would reserve judgement on Tony, until he met the man.

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It was a few days later when Steve introduced Clint to Tony. It had been decided by Agent Coulson that he would stay out of sight for now, although if anyone asked he had okayed the relationship on a temporary basis. To be reviewed again at a later date.

They met in a small café, and sat nursing cups of coffee and plates of cake.

Clint found it certainly telling that unlike when he'd been observing Tony and Steve, Tony was coming across as more Stark than Tony. But not to the extent that Clint was expecting.

He pegged it as more nerves than anything else.

The "Stark Mask", as Clint dubbed it, dropped completely when Steve went to use the facilities.

"So," Tony sighed, "I guess you're here to give the Shovel-Talk."

"More to get the lay of the land," Clint shrugged, "I Googled you."

"How much have you told him?" Tony raised a hand to cover his face, "Because I know I'm all kinds of messed up. No one should have to put up with a guy like me. But Steve… He actually seems to *want* to. But that's because he doesn't know what he's got. A mess."

“He doesn’t want to know anything.” Clint replied, “He says it’s your past. Not your future. But for my peace of mind I need to know a few things. Steve’s a good friend. A great friend. I don’t want him to get hurt. Particularly not if you’re just experimenting.”

“I’m not.”

“You’ve never shown an interest in men before.” Clint challenged.

“I have.” Tony countered, “Just no one ever found out.”

“They would have told.” Clint pointed out.

“It was only the one.” Tony closed his eyes, “And it was a long time ago. It was the gentlest rejection I’ve ever heard of. He told me he loved me like a little brother. That he could never love me that way, because he didn’t swing that way. That if I could live with that so could he. Nothing would have to change. I could. And nothing changed.”

“That’s some friend.” Clint breathed.

“That’s Rhodey,” Tony shrugged, “We’ve been like brothers since MIT. He’s on leave soon, I was going to introduce Steve to him then.”

“You are serious about this.” Clint realized, “Meeting the family?”

“Those he can,” Tony agreed, “I’m guessing you’re the same.”

“More like the annoying little brother who nagged.” Clint laughed lightly, “You’re not as bad as the Media made you out to be.”

“If it helps,” Tony breathed, “I haven’t slept with over half of the people who claim they have.”

“Why would they lie?”

“Because it’s better than the truth.” Tony snorted, “I had a system. At a party I’d look for the drunkest woman who would hang off my arm. I’d take them home. I’d give them more alcohol. I’d suggest they meet me in the bedroom. They’d strip and climb into bed. I’d go to my workshop. They’d pass out. When they woke up they either assumed that we’d had sex and they forgot due to the alcohol. Or they realized that they’d passed out *before*, and the shame caused them to lie.”

“Do you know who you have slept with?”

“There’s a list, somewhere.” Tony shrugged, “I don’t think about it.”

“Why?” Clint asked, “Why lie?”

“A lesson my father taught me.” Tony replied, “Those whom the Media would destroy, they first make famous. Everyone loves a show. And everyone loves to watch an idol fall. It makes for the best entertainment. If you don’t give the Media what they want they will

muckrake until they find it. Or they will just give in and invent it. I chose to give them what they wanted. At least that way I controlled the stories they ran. They were so busy looking at who I had slept with, and what crazy stunt I'd pulled this time, that they completely missed my business expertise. I got quite a few deals where my opponents thought I was a stupid playboy and failed to see how I manipulated the agreement in my favour until it was way too late."

"You did all that on purpose?" Clint breathed.

"Not at first." Tony shrugged, "But when I was at MIT there were so many exposés about what I was getting up to. I wasn't doing anything beyond studying, at least not during the first few years. I was underage for most of it. And it doesn't matter how much money you have, when you're a kid genius, no one wants to hang out with you."

"What about Rhodey?"

"Rhodey and I were assigned partners on a joint project." Tony replied, "Things happened. Look, I know I'm broken. And I have a bad habit of breaking things. But Steve… I'm not trying to break him. He's good and honest and true. He's like the living embodiment of American wholesome living. And I know he's too good for me. I know he should be with someone better than me. But I'm selfish. Until he says he doesn't want me anymore… I'm going to hang on to him."

Further questioning was interrupted by Steve returning to the table. So Clint returned to the fairly innocuous discussion of favourite movies.

"I'm sorry, Tony," Clint grinned, "I just don't like Science Fiction. It doesn't make sense to me. I don't get Star Wars. I don't get Star Trek. I don't get any of it. It's too far removed from reality. Give me a good old fashioned Western any day."

"Firefly." Steve looked at Tony.

"Absolutely." Tony agreed, "I'm a leaf on the wind."

"Watch how I soar." Steve finished.

"You lost me." Clint frowned.

"Science Fiction you'd like." Tony shrugged, "Come over some time with Steve. We'll do a movie night."

"Trust me Clint." Steve laughed, "You'll like it."

"I don't thin…"

Whatever Clint was going to say next was interrupted by both his and Steve's phones. A quick glance at the screen caused them to stand up as one.

"Emergency?" Tony asked as he rose up to match them.

"We've got to run." Steve's tone was apologetic.

"Bring him on Friday." Tony thumbed at Clint, "I'll order the pizza."

Tony quickly stole his cap back off Steve's head, only moments before he and Clint dashed out the café.

Chapter 4: Chapter 3

The battle wasn't one of the strangest that Hawkeye and Captain America had had to deal with over the relatively short period of time they had been on a team together. It was almost expected that Doctor Doom would use robots. And whenever there were robots running around, you could count on Iron Man to turn up.

It was like the Supervillain took offence at anyone else using robotics to attack what had become to be known as *his* territory; namely New York City and most of the state.

Though Iron Man would often turn up if anyone else was using *anything* else to attack said same area. And if robotics were used anywhere else the bookies would give good odds as to Iron Man turning up as well.

While Iron Man wasn't the most deadly of the Supervillains around, he did cause the most damage to the American economy. Which automatically put him near the top of the "Dastardly Supervillain List" (as Clint had dubbed the Senate's Priority List).

Whether it was Iron Man or the Alpha Team (of Captain America, Hawkeye and Black Widow) that drove the Latverian Monarch away nobody really cared. And the media would report it as a successful defence by the Alpha Team against the conjoined might of Doctor Doom and Iron Man.

In the changing room afterwards, Clint returned to the subject of Tony.

"I'm not sure," Clint confessed, "He reads honest. But there's a lot of bad reports about him."

"I don't care." Steve shrugged, "That's the past. He's never done anything to me. And I've been the one chasing him. So you can't say he corrupted me."

"Not my view," Clint snorted, "Unless you count your enjoyment of Science Fiction."

"You'll see," Steve grinned, "Do I have your blessing?"

"As long as he doesn't hurt you," Clint agreed, "But I need you to be careful."

“Why?”

“You know that place he goes?” Clint closed his eyes, “Inside his head?”

“Yes. What about it?” Steve was confused.

“You’d know it as Shell-Shock.” Clint sighed, “We call it PTSD. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He’s been hurt. Possibly very badly. No one knows what happened. Or if they do, they’re not telling.”

“When he’s ready, he’ll tell me.” Steve was firm.

“I’m just warning you.” Clint stated, “When he goes there, he’s not seeing you. And I have no doubt that he’d fight if he was triggered in the wrong way. I don’t think he’d succeed in actually hurting you, but you’d blame yourself forever if you had to hurt him to protect yourself, him or anyone else in the vicinity. I don’t want that to happen.”

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So Clint went to his first Tony Movie Night, and yes, the capital letters were needed. Despite the fact that it was Science Fiction he became engrossed in the story.

All three of them pigged out on pizza and garlic bread. There was enough to even satisfy Steve’s appetite.

They fell asleep where they had been watching. Steve on the couch. Tony squished in an armchair. Clint had been perched on the back of the couch, but he had ended up, somehow, under it.

Steve cooked a breakfast of pancakes and fresh bread rolls (he woke up much earlier than the other two). Then Tony added his contribution of omelettes and smoothies.

It was a worryingly domestic scene, Clint reflected. However it was also extremely comfortable. It was clear that the two of them had done this several times and knew exactly what the other wanted. Even Clint slotting in didn’t throw off their balance considerably.

“Just how far have the two of you gone?” Clint asked as he and Steve left Tony’s place (a very nice penthouse in an extremely upmarket area).

“What do you mean?” Steve frowned.

“How far have you gone?” Clint pressed, “What base? Kissing or full making out?”

“He’s very nervous about touch.” Steve reminded, “I’m taking it slow. Holding hands occasionally. I might even get to kiss his hand every so often.”

“He’s serious about you.” Clint sighed.

“You’re sure?” Steve breathed.

“Absolutely.” Clint nodded, “You two were like an old married couple at breakfast. If I hadn’t been there last night, you’d have gone to sleep in each other’s arms. Don’t try to deny it.”

“We’ve done it once before.” Steve agreed, “I had a devil of a time extracting myself to cook breakfast the next morning.”

“Look,” Clint turned to face Steve, “I don’t know how this is going to play out. But I’ll fight your corner for this. At the moment he’s good for you. You’re adjusting a lot faster than anyone expected you too.”

“He sometimes lets me into his workshop.” Steve shrugged, “Things don’t look quite as futuristic and scary after you’ve seen the insanity of his lab.”

“He’s still designing?” Clint blinked.

“Not weapons,” Steve replied, “And yes, he did tell me he used to. But its prosthetic limbs and body armour.”

That made sense to Clint. Before Tony had invented weapons to destroy-stroke-defeat the enemy. Now he was trying to protect the soldiers. Trying to give them a life after everything went wrong.

Tony hadn’t forgotten his roots. He had just found another way. And if the armour was anywhere *near* the quality of his weapons… Clint *really* wanted to get his hands on it.

It also made Clint think. May be Tony hadn’t been so far off the rails when he talked about the closing of the Weapons Department. Perhaps he had just decided on a slight variation of direction. A shield instead of a sword.

Clint could understand the feelings behind the action. For many years he had been an assassin for hire. And while the money had been good a part of him had died with every shot taken. Because it had never been for the benefit of the world. Only the benefit of some other lowlife.

Joining SHIELD had granted him the ability to improve the world with his shots. Yes, he still killed when required. But he was removing scum of the Earth so that the world was a cleaner place. And more often than not, he was not taking the shot as an assassin. He was taking the shot as overwatch. Protecting the men and women completing the mission.

He was not a killer anymore. He was a protector.

It seemed Tony had found that his preferred path as well.

Chapter 5: Chapter 4

Much to Clint's surprise, it took Natasha two weeks before she realized that the two men (Clint and Steve) were keeping a secret from her.

To be fair they weren't exactly trying to keep it a secret. It was just that Steve wasn't yet ready to go even semi-public. And Clint wasn't going to press him. Not after the absolutely *beautiful* spit-take Phil had done when he'd heard the news (Or should that be not *even*?).

And yes, it was that beautiful, Clint was mourning the fact that he didn't have it recorded.

Once Natasha realized they were keeping a secret, she cornered Clint and stared at him.

He knew what she wanted. He also knew he couldn't tell her.

"Sorry, Tasha," Clint shook his head, "Not my secret to tell. It's not a bad one. It's nothing personal. Steve didn't tell me. I found out. Leave it be. Give him time."

Her glare intensified.

"Those who need to know know." Clint added, "I had to talk him into that. Don't rush him. He has his reasons."

Clint knew he wasn't talking Natasha out of prying further. He knew she wouldn't stop until she found out. All he was doing was shutting himself down as a potential source of information.

Still, he unintentionally gave her what she wanted a few days later, when he walked in on Natasha suggesting potential dates to Steve. In his defence he'd just finished a particularly

exhausting battle against Iron Man, where the robotic villain had seemed determined to ensure Hawkeye used all his arrows and every *bit* of his evading skills.

"For crying out loud, Tasha. The man's taken. Give up already." Clint realized what he'd said the moment he said it, but then it was too late to take it back.

"So that's what you're hiding." She breathed, "He's dating a civilian."

"Leave it, Tasha." Clint growled, "There's no harm."

"What's her name?" Natasha pressed, "What's she look like? Blonde? Brunette? Red-head? I'm betting brunette."

"Leave it." Clint defended.

"Where's the harm? Just a name."

Clint knew what she was doing. Steve was a good man. He wouldn't withstand against the badgering of a friend for long. He didn't like lying to them. He didn't like keeping secrets from them.

"Tony." Steve breathed.

"Toni?" Natasha raised an eyebrow, "Short for Antonia?"

"Short for Anthony." Clint was firm, after noticing Steve's nod.

"Anthony," Natasha nodded quickly, "Priceless. A good name."

"Appropriate." Clint stated, before he had time to censor his thought.

Hey, he was tired. Give him a break.

After that, it all came out. Natasha took it much better than Phil, if you judged by her appearance. But Clint knew her tells. She was just as shocked.

It took two weeks after that before Natasha managed to talk Steve into letting her meet Tony.

On a side-note, Clint lost a bet with Phil regarding that. Clint thought it would only have taken a week.

They (Clint and Steve) had originally thought about putting it forward to Tony as a double date, but Natasha shot that down immediately.

"No. I wish as few lies as possible to a civilian. Harder for him to tell when we *are* lying that way."

So it was agreed that it was just a meeting of friends. Steve brought back the message that Tony would come to the bar they had agreed to meet at, but that he was bringing a friend, Rhodey.

They all sat down and exchanged pleasantries, Tony tucked neatly between Rhodes and Steve. It hadn't escaped any the of SHEILD Agents' notice that Rhodes was determined not to be separated from his friend. Acting rather like an overprotective big brother or a bodyguard, constantly on the alert.

Tony, on the other hand, kept himself in a position where he could make a bolt for any of the available exits on a moment's notice. A rather telling indicator that his PTSD was yet to be fully controlled.

Also his shades remained on. A feature that would normally have meant that both Natasha and Clint would have been more wary of him. However the fact that the lenses were only slightly tinted and his eyes could still be seen, albeit not clearly, kept them from classifying him as an enemy in their subconscious mind.

However Rhodes' overprotective nature kept their minds focussed on potential external threats, even while they enjoyed drinks and a chat.

And there was a threat that they identified quite early on. Though the dark-haired man didn't approach them, he also kept an eye on them and barely touched what appeared to be a lemonade.

"Tony," Clint spoke softly after about an hour of the man watching them, "There's someone watching us. Have you had any threats recently?"

"No." Tony shook his head.

Then seemingly oblivious to the danger he scanned the room.

"Oh, that's just Happy." Tony laughed, "Don't worry. He's just looking out for me."

With that Tony rose and wandered over to the man.

"Happy?" Steve blinked at Rhodes.

"Harold Hogan." Rhodes shrugged, "Tony's former bodyguard. When he… moved out here Happy refused to stay behind. He's loyal to Tony. He's like an overprotective, indulgent uncle to Tony. When Tony said that he was going to be meeting three of you, we decided that Tony shouldn't be outnumbered. But Happy wanted some distance in case this was a trap."

"You look out for Tony." Clint raised an eyebrow, as if asking a question. But he was merely stating a fact.

"The kid has a fast mouth, very little idea of what personal safety actually looks like and a reckless nature." Rhodes replied, "Or at least he did. Now… He's not the Tony I knew. But we're getting there. One bit at a time. That being said… Happy's the guy who will help me hide the body, if I have to kill you for hurting Tony."

"You seem sure you can." Natasha challenged slightly.

"Lady," Rhodes smirked, "If necessary I will drop a fricking bomb on you if you hurt Tony. No one hurts my little brother and gets away with it. He's been hurt too much already. I won't let anyone else hurt him, if I can help it. And if I can't… I won't let it go unavenged. Understand?"

"We understand." Steve nodded, "I have no intention of hurting him."

“Intentions are one thing.” Rhodes scoffed, “Actions are another. I never meant to leave him unprotected.”

With that Rhodes stood up and wandered over to Tony.

“Tones,” He called out lightly, “Can we go home? I haven’t had a chance to play games for months. I’m a little behind. Bet I can still beat you in Mario Kart though.”

“In your dreams,” Tony laughed, “Cause that’s the only place it’s ever happened, Rhodey.”

“And I’ve missed your bots.” Though Clint wasn’t quite sure he’d heard that right.

Rhodes slung an arm over Tony’s shoulders and gently steered the younger man out of the pub and towards the car. Hogan dashed around them to reach the car first.

“I like him.” Clint confessed as he watched them drive off, “Rhodes, I mean. I already said I was alright with Tony. He’s fiercely loyal.”

“He’s a good man.” Steve agreed.

“I am not sure that his loyalty is earned.” Natasha prevaricated, “However I do approve of it as a personality trait.”

Somehow Clint got the feeling that Natasha was not going to automatically approve of Tony. Though she was willing to give him a chance; whether that was to provide him with enough rope to hang himself or not, Clint wasn’t sure.

Natasha wasn’t too fond of billionaires. It had very little to do with the Communist indoctrination she had received as a child and more to do with her experiences as to the depths of depravity that such people were often willing to sink to. Depths that she had often had to wade in the name of Russia and later for her professional reputation as the best of the best.

Money means Power. Power means Corruption. That was the world as Natasha saw it. And how she had explained it to Clint. He wasn’t quite as jaded. Despite his rubbish childhood, he

had at least *had* a childhood to some degree. If Natasha had, she didn't remember it anymore.

"What did Rhodes mean by bots?" Clint asked, still unsure that he'd heard correctly.

"He programs them to help him." Natasha nodded, "Tablet or voice commands?"

"Voice commands." Steve replied, "They're very advanced."

"They still follow simple commands." Natasha shrugged, "Very similar to many I have seen before."

Clint knew that Natasha was often used to covertly investigate the development of weaponry, so she had seen a great many laboratories and was far more experienced with technology than either him or Steve.

"I don't think so." Steve shook his head, "They're like real people. Dum-E loves fire."

"Fire?" Clint breathed, "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Dum-E loves fire because it means he has to rush for his fire-extinguisher." Steve explained, "He charges up and uses basically the whole thing. Then he celebrates somehow. Tony always congratulates him for that. If Tony tells him off, Dum-E sulks."

"Hold on," Clint frowned, "The robot is called Dummy?"

"Yes," Steve nodded, "I think Dum-E is Tony's favourite. He certainly talks to Dum-E the most. The other two are Butterfingers and U."

"Me?" Clint blinked.

"No, U." Steve shook his head.

"It's called Clint?" Clint tried again.

"No. U."

"Clinton?"

"U."

"Barton?"

"You're messing with me, aren't you?" Steve realized.

“Couldn’t resist.” Clint grinned, “You say they’re like people?”

“I think so.” Steve nodded, “Tony certainly introduced all of them to me. Made sure that they knew I was a friend.”

“Let’s go home, Cap.” Clint smiled, “I don’t think Rhodes is going to let us near Tony for the rest of the day.”

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Even with the ongoing, slow moving (seriously, Clint was starting to call it *Glacial*) romance going on between Steve and Tony, work still carried on.

Clint wandered into Steve assigned berth (yes it wasn’t a ship, but for some unknown reason all bedrooms in SHIELD Barracks were called berths) one day.

As a member of the Initiative, Steve had a berth, but he never slept there if he could help it. Instead he used it more like an office.

“I think you’re getting a *little* obsessive.” Clint remarked looking around. A whole wall had been commandeered to display pictures, maps, reports and newspaper cuttings about one subject.

“I don’t understand him.” Steve shrugged.

“What’s there to get?” Clint frowned, “Iron Man is a Supervillain. Our job is to stop him. What’s to get?”

“Why?” Steve replied, “Why is he a villain? Why these attacks? Why here? Why now? Why?”

“Because he can?” Clint threw in the suggestion, “You’ve done a lot of work on this. Does it really bother you that much?”

“Yes.” Steve nodded, “Because I understand the others. Doctor Doom is jealous of Reed Richards. Magneto is a survivor of genocide and is trying to inflict that pain on others. Red Skull wanted power, to prove he was the greatest.”

“They have reasons. Greed. Pride. Wrath. Lust and Envy.” Clint agreed.

“The seven deadly sins,” Steve agreed, “Or at least five of them. But Iron Man doesn’t fit the pattern. He harms no one. Physically at least. The worst injuries that civilians have suffered have been bruises and cuts and maybe a concussion. Yes, there have been other injuries, but those are self-inflicted. Or inflicted by people trying to stop him. A rickoshay bullet. A trampling when the crowd stampedes. And he tries hard to prevent those.”

“So he doesn’t have a desire to kill or harm.” Clint shrugged, “He destroys buildings. Warehouses and factories usually. He breaks into research labs and steals or destroys things. Including records.”

“Yet none of that research has been used in his crimes.” Steve challenged.

“So far and as far as we can tell.” Clint reminded, “We could be seeing only a small part of his actions.”

“Maybe.” Steve conceded.

Clint scanned the wall again, before spotting a sketch. It depicted Iron Man emerging from flames, the flames seeming to form wings behind him.

“What’s this?” Clint touched it gently, “Fanart?”

“Something I felt compelled to draw.” Steve replied, “There was a report from Afghanistan of Iron Man. A very early report. I think it was technically the first report of Iron Man, though we didn’t have any sighting of him for another month or so. It was picked up later. The young boy who was interviewed said he saw Iron Man walk out of the flames like a Phoenix.”

“A Phoenix, huh?” Clint raised an eyebrow, “What was Iron Man doing in Afghanistan?”

“Destroying weapons.” Steve stated, “He went out there and destroyed weapons being held by insurgents and terrorists. He also saved the lives of a small village. In the middle of nowhere. Gulmira. I hadn’t even heard of it before.”

“So why would a Supervillain destroy weapons and save people who would be inconsequential to him?” Clint realized, “He really does make no sense. You tried asking if Coulson has anything to help?”

“He keeps brushing me off.” Steve shrugged, “I think he’s under orders to do so.”

“I’ll see if I can get any further.” Clint declared, “Get some rest. Go home. This won’t be solved tonight. And a suggestion? You *might* want to consider covering this up. Or at least making it less obvious. It’s a little obsessive. And if there’s a reason Coulson is feeding you the party line you don’t want to attract anyone’s attention. We’re an agency full of spies. I’m not entirely certain all of them are ours.”

It was a joke. But Clint would later consider his words prophetic.

Chapter 6: Chapter 5

"Phil, why is Steve being told to ignore the motives and just take Iron Man down?" Clint didn't beat around the bush that night, when he had supper with Phil.

"SHIELD has pressure on it." Phil was blunt.

"The World Security Council?" Clint breathed, "Why? He's a pest, yes. Aggravating, yes. Frustrating, yes. But he's a *financial* menace. Everything he does can be repaired or replaced. And sometimes it's more a prank than an attack."

"Money has deep pockets." Phil reminded, "Deep pockets have influence. One death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. The Senate. The World Security Council. They are protected from the chance of violence against them. They are unlikely to be harmed by Supervillain actions. Even if they are attacked, they are more valuable alive than dead. And they know that. But Iron Man's attacks affect them directly. Their bank accounts are hit. And to them that makes it a personal attack."

"That should not be the reason for our priorities." Clint declared.

"But it is." Phil shrugged, "We need the goodwill of those people to continue to get the funding and security clearance we have. So we have to abide by their wishes. Iron Man also targets weapons. While he's not making a significant impact in the personal weapon market, it's the bigger stuff that's becoming harder to get. Not one single Jericho missile, from SI, has managed to reach its destination since Iron Man appeared. He's got a plan. However no-one with the influence is interested in finding out what it is. They just want him gone. They don't care how. If they can, they'd like to parade him around as a defeated prize. But if he dies in a battle, they'd take that as well."

"And you?"

"I'd like to know why. But have accepted that I most likely won't. Tell Steve to stop looking. It'll get him into trouble. And there's no way to predict where Iron Man will attack next based on his previous attacks. I've tried."

Clint nodded and concentrated on his plate again. He tried not to let Phil realize that he'd much rather share the same bed as his Handler. Rather than their current situation where Clint was more like a lodger who never bothered to pay, but would pitch in on shopping, cooking and cleaning.

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Clint had just gotten back off a long op. As per his habit he was curled up in his safe place inside SHIELD (he had yet to receive permission to go off base following his debriefing).

"Something's wrong with Tony." Steve tapped on one of the ventilation pipes.

"Good morning to you too." Clint nodded as he emerged, "How'd you know I was in here? I'm never in here… Officially."

"Heard your breathing." Steve shrugged.

"My breathing?" Clint stared, "Seriously?"

"It's very distinctive." Steve returned, "There's something wrong with Tony."

"Like what?" Clint asked as he led them into a nearby empty room, "His PTSD getting worse?"

"I don't know." Steve ran a frustrated hand through his hair, "I don't know. He's pulling away. And won't say why. He's wearing long sleeves all the time. Even indoors. He won't take his shades off. And his fingertips… There's pinpricks. Like he's stabbed himself with a needle multiple times, for a good length of time."

"How long has this been going on?"

"About a month?" Steve shrugged, "I'm not sure. I didn't notice at first, I'm sure of that. Look, every time I ask he deflects. He's spending more time in his lab than I think is healthy. Something is wrong. And he won't tell me. He won't tell me anything."

"What do you want me to do?"

"He likes you. He counts you as a friend. He might think I'm too close. He might talk to you where he won't talk to me."

"I'm not the expert in getting people to talk. You might do better with Tasha."

"He doesn't trust her. You know that. The laugh's a little too stilted. A little too put on. The shades never come off around her. You steal the shades. Right off his face and he doesn't object. Instead he laughs. He trusts you. He once told me that growing up he always wished he had a little brother. And that now he seems to have got one."

"And you tell a brother things you wouldn't tell a lover." Clint nodded, "Got it."

He frowned slightly looking at Steve's slight blush.

“You *have* gotten further than hand-holding, right?” Clint pressed.

“We kiss.” Steve defended himself.

“And no further?” Clint stared, “Tell me you’ve taken your shirts off!”

“We’re taking things slow.”

“Holy, Captain! This isn’t slow. This is positively *glacial*. No, it’s *worse* than that. Speed things up a little.”

“Tony’s setting the pace.” Steve snapped, “I won’t press him.”

“Tony?” Clint breathed, “The Master of the One-Night Stand? Even if he hasn’t slept with as many people as his reputation says, it’s still a lot… Okay, now I know something happened to him. Let me get my permission to wander and I’ll go talk to him.”

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Clint had become a recognised face at Tony’s apartment block. To the point that the doorman smiled and nodded at him.

“Hey Shadi.” Clint smiled, “How you doing?”

“Good, Mister Barton.” Shadi replied, “You haven’t been here in a while, sir.”

“Business.” Clint shrugged, “Put me on the far side of the world.”

“Very good, sir.” Shadi nodded.

Clint stepped into the lift and tapped the button for the penthouse entrance. As always, he wondered why there was such a lack of security to get to the penthouse. Anyone could step into the lift and get to Tony’s floor. While getting into the penthouse itself would require skill with the locks Tony had protecting him, it wouldn’t take much to booby trap the door and cause harm (if not death) that way.

Occupational hazard, Clint often thought about how to kill someone. He always felt bad about it later when he did it about a friend. But knowing how to launch an attack was the first step in knowing how to *stop* such an attack. So he never felt all that bad for very long.

Clint didn't bother with the doorbell. Wasn't his style. Instead he rapped on the wooden door. He used the familiar old pattern of "Shave and a haircut, two bits".

He'd barely finished when the door opened. However Tony wasn't the one who opened it. It seemed to open on its own.

Cautiously Clint stepped into Tony's home. His eyes skittering from left to right. From up to down. He was looking for any signs of a threat.

What he saw instead was signs of distress.

Steve hadn't been kidding when he said something was wrong. There was a scent of alcohol in the air that brought back far too many bad memories for Clint's liking. He could see the bottles lined up. All open.

Clint remembered that repeated word in the SHIELD files: Alcoholic. Despite that word, this was the first time he remembered smelling anywhere *near* this much alcohol in Tony's home. It hadn't registered, but at all their movie nights the only alcohol in the home was that which Clint or Steve brought. And Tony had never touched it. Instead restricting himself to fruit juice or sodas.

The only consolation was that all the bottles were shoved near the sink, as if the alcohol had been poured down it. Clint hoped that that was true.

"Tony?" Clint called out after reassuring himself that there was no-one in his immediate vicinity.

He would be best off not pretending that he wasn't there. His knocking on the front door had prevented that from being an option. However acting the part of a visiting harmless friend could grant him the extra time he needed if there were any villains in the penthouse.

"Clint?" Tony called back.

Clint followed the voice until he reached Tony, who was in the ‘Den’. More of a family living room with soft-furnishings. It was where most of the movie nights and game nights happened.

Tony was sitting on the floor surrounded by books and scattered sheets of paper. Some of the paper was screwed up. Some of the paper was shredded beyond all hope of reconstructing the image that had once graced it.

But it was Tony himself that caused the most distress to Clint. The man’s colour was almost totally gone. His skin was nearly the same colour as full fat cream. Apart from the dark bags underneath his eyes, almost hidden by the lightly tinted shades he wore. His hair was a mess and his facial hair hadn’t been trimmed in what Clint estimated to be nearly a week.

His clothes had been worn for nearly three days by Clint’s guess and were stained with motor oil and grease.

His hands were shaking and were wrapped around a large mug of what looked like coffee. Judging by the couple of abandoned mugs lying around it wasn’t his first. There were also more than a few cans of Caf-Pow scattered about.

Clint was willing to bet that Tony hadn’t slept for the last few days, and unless someone confiscated all caffeine from him in the near future probably wouldn’t for a couple more.

“Hey,” Tony frowned, “You don’t call. You don’t write. A guy might think you don’t care anymore.”

“I care.” Clint replied, “Sorry. I was in the wrong part of the world. Time difference. And I didn’t think I was going to be there all that long. Work went to hell. Guess that was why they had to send in a trouble-shooter.”

Trouble-shooter, Clint mentally snorted every time he rolled out that phrase with regards to his civilian cover. He *was* trouble. And he *was* a shooter. It was a perfect description of him and his job. And yet was so normal that no-one ever looked twice at it. Particularly not with Clint’s appearance. Despite his well-toned muscles Clint always looked harmless when he

wandered around civilian style. Partly due to his manner of dress. He looked like a young man who exercised a great deal. Not a highly skilled assassin and spy.

"You alright?" Clint asked Tony, "You don't look so good. Steve's worried about you."

Clint sat down near Tony. He watched as the former industrialist tensed and curled up slightly as if expecting an attack which he couldn't defend himself from.

Clint gently pulled the mug from between Tony's hands and sniffed it slightly. He could feel the caffeine waking him up, just from the scent. It was basically pure espresso in a standard sized mug. Enough caffeine to keep a normal man bouncing off the walls for two days straight.

He set the mug down to one side, well away from Tony.

"Please Tony," Clint slowly reached out to touch Tony's knee, "There's something wrong. I can see that, plain as day. Please let me help."

"You can't." Tony shook his head.

"I can." Clint argued, "I want to. I want to help."

"You can't." Tony closed his eyes, "There's nothing you can do. Just go away."

"Try me." Clint fired back, "I can fight anything."

"Not this." Tony laughed, "You can't help with this."

"Anything you need." Clint stated, "Just tell me, I'll get it."

"Can I ask you something personal?" Tony breathed.

"Of course." Clint was surprised at the change in direction of the conversation, but went along with it.

"If you knew that your next birthday was the last birthday you were ever going to have, what would you do?"

"I would spend it with the people I cared for and who cared for me." Clint replied immediately, "And I would fight. I would fight whatever was killing me for one more year.

One more month. One more week. One more day. One more hour. One more minute. One more *second*. I would keep fighting all the way up to the end. Is that what this is about, Tones? Are you dying? What's happened? What's killing you?"

"Afghanistan." Tony laughed bitterly, "Afghanistan is killing me. I'm killing me. Took me long enough. Shouldn't have lasted a week. Instead a year or so down the line I'm still here."

"What can I do to help?"

"Nothing. There's nothing you can do to help. This is the result of my own foolish pride. My own stupidity. I am dying and I will die. I am fighting it all I can, but it's not enough. I can't beat this."

"Of course you *can*!" Clint snapped, "You're Tony Goddamn Stark! There's *nothing* you can't do. And if you can't fight it alone, well… When you can't run, you crawl, and when you can't crawl… When you can't do that, you find someone to carry you."

"Get out!" Tony snarled, "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

Tony had risen to his feet. He was getting louder and louder. More and more frantic. He was basically screaming now.

Clint had fallen over at the sudden change in emotions and situation. Somehow Tony's words tapped into that tiny primeval part of his brain and overrode his normal thinking processes. Before he knew what had happened he had scrabbled away from Tony, towards the door. Once outside of Tony's reach, he had flipped over and crawled, eventually rising to his feet and running out of the penthouse.

He didn't stop running until he was halfway down the staircase. His heart still pounding in his chest.

His legs collapsed underneath him. It wasn't exhaustion of a physical type. But shock setting in. And while Clint had dealt with many situations before that would put a normal person into shock, this was different.

In all the time Clint had known Tony, the billionaire had rarely raised his voice and never appeared visibly distressed. He'd been upset, hurting, cautious, guilty and any number of other negative emotions. But not to this degree.

Steve was right. And Clint was dead certain that he was right in believing that Tony believed he was dying. And couldn't stop it.

Chapter 7: Chapter 6

With shaking hands he reached into his pocket and pulled out his mobile. It took him a moment but he managed to find the number programed into it. He'd never dialled this number before. However it was the only phone he could think that could help him.

"Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes." The voice was strong and clear.

"Rhodes," Clint managed to calm his breathing enough to speak clearly, "This is Barton."

"Barton?" Rhodes sounded confused at first, "Oh, Clint! Call me Rhodey. Why are you calling me?"

"Something is wrong with Tony." Clint had propped himself up in the stairwell, "I think he's dying."

"What happened?"

"I don't know." Clint breathed, "He's scared. Steve noticed him pulling him away. So he asked me to see if I could find out. Tony asked me what I would do if I knew my next birthday would be my last."

"What else did he say?" Rhodey's voice was low and dangerous.

"He said Afghanistan was killing him." Clint shrugged, "Said he was killing him."

"Calm down," Rhodey seemed to be trying to reassure the sniper, "Calm down, kid."

"Not a kid." Clint snapped back.

"Younger than me." Rhodey pointed out, "What else? Was there alcohol there?"

"Yes." Clint nodded, even though Rhodey couldn't see him, "Bottles and bottles of it. By the sink. Whole place stank of it. But Tony wasn't acting drunk."

"Not a reliable indicator." Rhodey sighed, "I've seen him down almost an entire bottle of scotch and then go on to get a perfect score in an exam. Tony's a functional alcoholic. Emphasis on the functional. As he puts it, the trick is not to get hung up on the alcoholic, but to celebrate the functional part of the sentence. I'll see if I can get immediate leave."

"Is there anyone else I can call?"

"No, kid." Rhodey murmured, "I'm the only person who knows what happened in Afghanistan. I'm the only person who stands a *chance* at finding out what is going on inside

Tony's insane genius brain. What I need you to do is stay with him and try to switch his coffee for de-caff. I presume he's got to the coffee stage?"

"There's stages to this thing?"

"Tony has stages. Think of it like the stages of grief. Has he got to the coffee?"

"Yes. Large mugs. Smells like espresso. There's also caf-pows everywhere."

"Switch him to de-caff. I'm on my way, even if I have to go AWOL."

"I can't. I'm sorry." Clint whispered.

"Why not?"

"He threw me out."

"How? Physically?"

"Just kept screaming. Yelling at me to get out. I don't know what happened. I just started running. I didn't even wait for the lift."

"Easy kid. Okay, screw getting permission for leave. I'll get it retroactively, if I bother at all."

"Won't you get in trouble?"

"Restriction to limits for thirty days or a reprimand. Not something I'll worry about. Besides the Air Force assigned me to liaise with Tony years ago. They assigned me that position because I was close with Tony. They should figure this would happen, even *after* Tony semi-retired. I'm on my way. Listen, kid, I need you to go back up to Tony's penthouse. I want you to sit outside the door. Don't go in. In this state Tony's more a danger to himself than anyone else. But he'll only lash out if there's someone there for him to lash out *at*. You did the right thing. I need you to stop anyone else from going in. And to tell me if he leaves. I doubt he will. Just stay there and keep watch."

Rhodey hung up. Clint stared at the phone for a moment. Rhodey's mannerisms towards him were completely different from last time they had met. When the man had been barely civil towards him, clearly only being civil for Tony's sake. This was a complete one-eighty.

And while Clint was used to life spinning on its heel, this threw him.

However he climbed back up the stairs.

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By the time Rhodey arrived, Clint wasn't entirely sure how much time had passed since he had called. Only that it alternatively seemed like just a second ago and a million years.

Unable to cope with sitting outside the door, Clint had managed to wedge himself onto the top shelf of the ornamental alcove bookcase. It gave him a good view of the lift and the door, yet kept him from being easily spotted.

"Hey." Clint called out, once he spotted Rhodey looking for him with a frown on his face.

"What you doing up there?" Rhodey asked, "I asked you to keep an eye on things."

"I can see better from a distance." Clint shrugged, as he descended.

"Are you alright?" Rhodey pressed gently.

"Bit shaken." Clint replied, "I've never seen Tony like that."

"Seen it a few times." Rhodey murmured, "Always hope I'll never see it again. Your job's done here, kid. Leave Tony to me."

"Why are you being so nice?" Clint breathed, "Last time you were moments away from killing me."

"Last time, you were there as Steve's friend." Rhodey pointed out, "And I was there as Tony's family. This time, you're here as Tony's little brother. That makes you mine. And I don't hurt my brothers."

"How do you figure that?"

"Tony calls me at least once every week. Has done since he 'disappeared'. Guess he wanted someone to talk to. And he talks about Steve, a lot. But as much as he talks about Steve, he talks about you. I wasn't too happy at first. Thought he might be in love with you. Then I listened better. I could hear myself talking to my mum about my new friend Tony. I could hear the difference between talking about you and talking about Steve. Steve, it's Eros and Agape. You, it's Agape and Philia."

"I don't get it."

“It’s a brotherly love.” Rhodey explained, “He sees you as his little brother. And I see him in the same way. If I’m his brother and you’re his as well… That means we’re brothers. I’ve always been his older brother. And the reason that the big brother is born first is to protect the little brothers and sisters that come after him.”

“I don’t need your protection.” Clint snarled.

The easy statements that Rhodey was coming up with were running red-hot pokers up and down Clint’s emotional nerves. If what Rhodey was saying was true about brothers, then what was Barney?

It also slightly rankled that Tony deemed Clint in need of his protection. Rhodey, he could understand, the man was a Lieutenant Colonel. If it wasn’t for the fact that Clint considered himself much more dangerous, he would have easily accepted the protection easily. As it was he kept his secret with a smug little smile.

But Tony? Tony was a civilian through and through. Clint didn’t need his protection. If anything he would be the one protecting Tony. And it would be a fact he would make sure Tony knew at the next available opportunity.

No one protected Clint without his permission. He was Overwatch. He was Hawkeye. He was the protector.

“Go home, Clint.” Rhodey instructed, “Go home. Contact Steve and tell him I’m handling it. I’ll see what I can do to solve this.”

“And if it can’t?” Clint didn’t want to ask the question, but knew he needed to know the answer.

“There’s the greatest brain in the world beyond this door,” Rhodey grinned, “And he’s not a man who lies down and gives up. Give him a box of scraps and some time and he’ll do things you couldn’t even imagine in your wildest dreams. I just need to kick him into the right mind-set and aim him in the right direction. I’ve been doing this longer than you think. I’ll call you later. Stand down. Your watch is over. You’re relieved.”

With a squeeze to Clint’s shoulder, Rhodey turned to Tony’s front door. He entered and the door behind him.

It would only be later that Clint realized that although he saw Rhodey reach out towards the doorknob, he never touched it. And the door shut gently behind Rhodey, without his influence.

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Of course Clint couldn't just leave. He couldn't just walk away. Not from a dying friend.

So he quickly set himself up in a nest on one of the nearby buildings. It wasn't really tall enough. Tony clearly liked to be up high. It had been in one of his SHIELD psychoanalyses. They had attributed it to a sense of superiority and elitism.

Clint rather believed that it was more linked to a feeling of safety being up high. After all that was why *he* liked being up high. Because no-one looked upwards to find a person. Or rather they *rarely* did so. And it was harder to hit a man standing above you. There was a reason castles were built on hills all those years ago.

So he couldn't keep a true eye on Tony, instead having to see what he could see from an upwards angle, rather than his preferred downwards.

He couldn't see much. The den had spectacular views, but the balcony was blocking his line of sight. Or rather distorting it, as it was primarily made of glass.

However he could see Rhodey walking around the room. One hand up, grabbing the back of his head. Almost as if he had gone to run his hand through his hair in stress or anguish, but forgotten that he didn't have enough hair to do that properly.

Then Rhodey must have sank into a chair or down onto the floor, because he disappeared out of Clint's point of view.

Several hours later he appeared again, this time with Tony. They were both headed towards the door.

Clint couldn't be sure, but there seemed to be a certain bounce in Tony's step. Something he'd only seen when Tony was really excited or nervous about something. However he couldn't be sure.

He tried to move to follow where they were going, but lost sight of them. He watched the garage exit for a long while, expecting them to emerge from there if they were going anywhere. However they didn't.

He came to the obvious conclusions that either they didn't leave the building or they had used the pedestrian exit.

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"Stark was spotted today." Phil mentioned over dinner.

"Where?" Clint asked.

"The Stark Private Estate on Long Island." Phil shrugged, "SHIELD has kept the property under surveillance for a long time. Howard Stark was one of the founders of SHIELD."

"I know."

"It has long been suspected that he kept some hidden files in the Stark Estate, relating to our founding and to Project Rebirth. Although discrete and not-so discrete searches have revealed nothing."

"No-so discrete?" Clint frowned, "Wouldn't Tony have noticed?"

"Stark hasn't visited that particular residency since he left there to go to MIT. He even set up a home on the other side of the continent to avoid having to go in there. He built the Malibu Mansion to steer clear of the place. He's been so reliable at not going in there no-one got round to removing the classified SHIELD files kept there. Hence why his visit has raised eyebrows."

"Was he with Rhodey?"

“Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes? Yes. Do you know something?”

“Something bad happened out in Afghanistan. I don’t know what. I don’t know when exactly. But it was bad and Tony mentioned that it’s killing him. Whoever put Tony’s profiles together for SHIELD was so badly wrong it’s not even funny. The man is hurting inside. And I don’t know how to stop it. He’s so desperate for family that he’s basically adopted me as his little brother according to Rhodey. And somehow he’s inspired such loyalty in Rhodey that he’d willingly go AWOL rather than leave Tony hurting. Loyalty like that isn’t one sided.”

“Stark isn’t aware enough of other people to understand loyalty.”

“I think he is. I just think he got fed up of people abusing his trust and decided to hide it. Better to have no friends than to be burned by those who are fair-weather friends. Think about it, when he went missing how many people went looking for him, who could reasonably be considered his friends? There was a conspicuous silence on their part. Rhodey was the only person who had a personal connection who was pushing for the search. Miss Potts was the only one to shed tears. And according to SHIELD files, Mister Hogan spent an increased amount of time in church.”

“You shouldn’t have access to those files.”

“When did that ever stop me? Are you going to report me?”

“You know I won’t. I’m your Handler. I protect you from higher up. That’s my job.”

And deep inside Clint knew that that was the way things had to be. But that still didn’t stop him from wishing for more. Even though he knew he would never get it.

“I know.” Clint smiled; the smile hiding the hurt in his heart.

Chapter 8: Chapter 7

It took nearly a week before Rhodey called Clint.

"Barton." Clint answered the phone.

"Clint," Rhodey's voice was warm, "It's Rhodey. Tell Steve I've fixed the problem."

"What was wrong? And what do you mean fixed? People can't just be *fixed*. It doesn't work that way."

"Tony's not like everyone else. His problems are different. And no, people can't be fixed. But people is a general term and Tony isn't the same as everyone else. As I just said… *Man*, I need some sleep. I haven't pulled this many all-nighters since college. Then again I haven't played Tony's lab assistant often since then either. That I did miss. Though this point of exhaustion, not so much… Look, I need some sleep before I report back and get my just deserts. All you need to know is that it was a hardware issue, not a software issue. Tony is asleep right now… Hopefully. Don't give up on him. Tony doesn't understand people. He's really good at faking it. Really good at giving people what they want to see and hear and believe. But he's just faking it. Always has. Tell him when he crosses a line. Tell him when he upsets you. Tell him and tell him how to make it better. How to *be* better. He's a great man. And I think one day, if we're very, very lucky he might even be a good one."

"I don't understand."

"Tony grew up without many friends. Without much of a father. Without much of a mother. He had a butler… Think about it. Why do you think he built a robot at eight? He wanted the company. The nannies he did have were fired if they showed him too much kindness or affection. You're dealing with a horrendously insecure man."

"Why are you telling me this? You've clearly set yourself up as his protector."

"You didn't run when he was hurting. You stayed where you could. You called me when you were in over your head. And you kept on the alert looking out for him. You're not a fair-weather guy. You're committed to this friendship. And you understand that someone needs to protect Tony. Even when he doesn't think he needs it. Or perhaps especially then."

"Perhaps I should just leave you alone so that you can get some sleep."

"Would appreciate it. Give me a call in about a week, so that I know what is going on with Tony."

"You're not sure this is a permeant fix?"

"I think that after where he's had to go to fix this, he might take a while to deal with it. Check in with me. I'll check in with him."

"Should I go visit him?"

"Might be worthwhile, but give him until tomorrow afternoon. He might be awake by then."

"It's noon."

"Okay, tomorrow evening then. We haven't slept since you called me. Night."

"See you later." Clint breathed as Rhodey hung up.

He found a chair to sit down on. He was having difficulty to take in what Rhodey had been saying.

The problem wasn't that he was finding it difficult to accept that Rhodey was willing to leave Tony in his care.

The problem was that he *wasn't*. Because he could completely understand where Rhodey was coming from. Everything he had read in Tony's files had said that he had only three people he was close to. Even Stane had written Tony off as dead in Afghanistan. In fact he had asked for the search to be ended. Stating that he felt it was a needless risk to military personnel to search for a dead body.

That particular fact wasn't widely known. Nor was the fact that when Rhodey had been told that the military was considering calling off the search that he had punched the paper-pusher who was carrying the message in the face.

Considering that Stane had known Tony for virtually all of his life, it seemed quite cold and callous. Which did explain a lot. Because if that was how the person had known Tony the longest treated him, he probably didn't know how normal people interacted.

Rhodey probably had gotten used to assessing people very quickly as to whether they were in for it for the short term or the long term. And somehow Clint had ticked all the boxes that said he wasn't just going to be there and then gone.

Which was true in its own way. Unless SHIELD specifically ordered that Clint was to end his friendship with Tony, he wouldn't walk out on the eccentric genius. And perhaps not even then. Clint wasn't exactly known for following orders that he didn't agree with.

Also Clint *liked* Tony. He felt an overwhelming need to protect the man. Clint knew it was a something that the psychologists said he had an issue with. He had a need to protect anyone he deemed vulnerable or precious to him. And somehow Tony ticked both boxes. He was wounded, damaged and hurting. He was a civilian, untrained in combat and most likely suffering from PTSD.

Despite the bold front Tony put on, he was exposed, and Clint was certain that he knew it.

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Clint waited until it was about evening, before going to Tony's place. He entered the lift without much worry, noticing Hogan behind the security desk.

He entered the lift and pressed the button for the penthouse.

However the lift didn't start to climb, instead it started downwards.

"Mister Barton," An English accent came from above Clint, "Sir has requested your presence in the basement."

"Who are you?" Clint moved so that his back was in the corner of the lift; so that he had the maximum amount of protection available to him.

"I am Jarvis, Mister Barton." The voice replied.

Clint noticed that the decent was taking longer than it should, if he was being taken to the underground garage. He was travelling deeper.

Clint shifted his body so that he could easily reach his knife if necessary, yet still remained protected by the corner of the lift. He had a view of the lift entrance, but wasn't immediately visible himself, seeing how most people would travel in the middle of the lift.

Finally the lift doors opened.

Loud music assaulted Clint's ears. He managed to recognise it as AC/DC's "Shoot to Thrill".

"Jarvis," Tony's voice called out, "I thought you said that Clint had arrived?"

"He is in the lift, sir." Jarvis stated calmly.

"Clint?" Tony shouted, "It's alright. Come on in. Welcome to my lab."

Cautiously and nervously Clint edged forward. He took in the high-tech appearance of the room. It was large and brightly lit. A few robots could be seen moving around, one visibly wearing a hat and covered in streamers.

Admittedly they weren't what Clint immediately thought about when he thought about robots. He usually thought about humanoid robots, such as the Doombots, Drones or Iron Man.

However it was Tony who caught Clint's eyes the most. He was leaning against one of the work-surfaces, dressed immaculately. His hair was returned to its usually neat manner and his goatee had been trimmed. His skin was still far too pale, but it was no longer so close to white. The bags underneath his eyes were gone and his eyes sparkled with life once again.

In fact he looked much more like Tony than he had… No, more like Stark. But with Tony's facial expressions. There was no stage smile here. Only the real and true thing.

"You're looking better." Clint breathed, "Much better."

"I'm feeling better." Tony grinned, "Rhodey told me you called him. Thanks for that."

"I didn't know what else to do." Clint shrugged, "What is this place?"

“My workshop.” Tony explained, “Where else would you expect me to keep it?”

“I don’t know.” Clint confessed, “Don’t people wonder why the electricity draw of this building is so high?”

“No,” Tony shook his head, a grin on his face, “A couple of decades back SI put together something called an Arc Reactor. It was meant to keep the Hippies quiet. Green energy. But it wasn’t cost effective, and SI didn’t do enough work on it to make it so. But it works. I put one in here. It runs this place. Produces enough energy that we’re virtually off the grid here. I put a few solar panels on the roof to cover for that.”

“And the noise?”

“Very efficient soundproofing.” Tony returned, “I didn’t turn my music on as the lift opened, so you should have noticed it.”

Not really, Clint thought. His hearing could have also interfered with his ability to notice Tony’s music. But he’d take the Genius’ word.

“How’d you dig this place? Surely someone would have noticed.”

“I didn’t dig it recently.” Tony smirked, “I brought the building when I was in MIT. Tore the old one down. Had this built with the workshop back then. Complete with my hidden garage, so people don’t notice my car coming and going. All I had to do was install the Arc Reactor.”

“Why don’t more people know?”

“I hid it. I’m good with my hacking. Lost the records where I could. Kept everything on the down-low. Only a few people know I own this place, Rhodey, Happy, Steve and now you. Pepper knows where it is, but not that I own it.”

“Why?”

“I wanted a retreat. Somewhere I could go where no-one could find me. No one knows I live here, beyond those who absolutely need to know. Not even the other residents of the building.”

“Surely the architect…”

“I designed the place.” Tony shook his head, “And all the builders’ contracts have secrecy clauses built in.”

“You designed it?” Clint breathed, “But you’re not an architect.”

“I sat through a few lectures.” Tony remarked, “Read the books. Sat the exam. Passed it, of course. Knowing how something is built is the first step to knowing how to destroy it. Technically I have the qualifications. I just don’t have it under my real name.”

“You hacked again?”

“I keep a lot of things under wraps.”

“I’ll say.” Clint looked around the room, taking it in more fully, “Is that a bow?”

He pointed at one of the walls, which appeared to have a bow on a bow stand there.

“You’ve seen Hawkeye on the news?” Tony asked rhetorically, “I started wondering why a bow. I wondered how far I could push the design. How difficult is it to make a bow? It entertained me for a while. I joined a few archery clubs to get an idea of what I was dealing with. Why’d you focus on that?”

“Archery’s a hobby of mine,” Clint was quick to deflect, “May I?”

“Sure,” Tony laughed, “Hell, you want it, you keep it. It’s done its job. Kept me busy for a while. Distracted me.”

“Those your bots?” Clint motioned at the three manoeuvring around, even as he picked up the bow to examine it.

“Yes,” Tony grinned, “Dum-E’s covered in the party stuff. Butterfingers is trying to tidy. And U is trying to clean Dum-E. Dum-E let U help or God help me I’ll donate you to a community college. I mean it this time!”

Clint didn’t hold back his laughter as he watched the comedy act of the three bots, Dum-E desperately wanting to keep his hat and streamers. Steve had been right, these weren’t just robots. They were alive and almost human in their natures.

“This place is amazing.” Clint breathed.

“I know.” Tony grinned, “It’s my nirvana. I’ve got all the toys I need. My safe place. No one can get in here that I don’t want.”

“Then why open it to me now?”

“Because you tried to help, even when I didn’t want it. You stood by my side, even when I was in one of my really bad states… And I need your advice. You’re the only one

who can tell me what I need to know."

"And what's that?" Clint left the bow, where he'd been playing with it; moving over to where Tony was leaning.

With a gentle hop, Clint vaulted onto the worktop and sat there, cross-legged.

"You're Steve's best friend." Tony replied, "You know him better than most."

"Yeah, sure." Clint nodded, "What about it?"

"He's probably told you how far our relationship has gotten?"

"Steve's not the type to kiss and tell. As you should know. But I've managed to get out of him that that statement should probably read how far your relationship *hasn't* gotten, in the purely physical sense."

"That's my fault." Tony shrugged, "You know I was in Afghanistan. A prisoner of terrorists."

"Yes."

"They hurt me. They hurt me badly."

"So I gathered. You've got PTSD from it."

"That's not the problem. I've basically got the worst of that under control. It's the other scars that are the problem."

"Steve won't care about the scars." Clint reassured, "He fell in love with you. Not the physical. But the mental… If that makes sense."

"In a crazy way it does." Tony murmured, "But it's so totally different from what I'm used to. Look, I can't really explain the issue with my scars. Can I show you and you can tell me what you think Steve will think? I don't want to get burned."

"Sure." Clint smiled, "But I'm telling you now, no matter how bad it looks, Steve won't care. And I'm not looking at anything below the belt. I do not need to see that much of you."

"That's okay," Tony replied, "The problem isn't below the belt."

Stepping away from the bench slightly, Tony turned away from Clint and removed his t-shirt. Then he removed a fairly heavy fabric vest that was on underneath. Clint frowned slightly at

that. The weather was nowhere near cold enough for a vest outside; never mind inside Tony's lab.

Holding the vest in a tight grip up to his chest, almost as if it were a child's safety blanket, Tony turned around.

Then he lowered his arms, revealing his chest area.

Clint sucked in a deep, sudden breath as he took in what was being show to him. It was nothing he had expected and nothing he had seen before.

A soft, but bright, blue light emanated from Tony's chest. It was precisely in the centre of his body, about level with his heart. Probably about the size of Clint's fist. For some reason it was causing little warning lights to flash in Clint's head. But he couldn't figure out why.

Despite looking so strange and weird, it was also hauntingly beautiful.

"What is that?" Clint asked, "What's it for?"

"Everyone thinks I came out of the initial attack… The initial kidnapping unharmed." Tony sighed, "I didn't. I was too close to the explosion. I'm told that they call people like me, The Walking Dead."

"Why?" Clint pressed. He had to know the very term was making his heart sink with fear and trepidation. It couldn't be as bad as it sounded, could it?

"Because it takes about a week for the shrapnel imbedded in a person to reach their heart. I was lucky. They wanted me alive. Implanted an electromagnet to keep the shrapnel at bay."

It was.

"They put that thing in you?" Clint had to know.

“No. They wired me to a car-battery. I built the first one of these to replace the battery. It’s an Arc Reactor. A miniature version.”

“What are those scars?” Clint frowned, forcing his mind away from the other questions buzzing around his brain, “They’re more recent.”

“Which ones?” Tony queried.

“The roots growing from it.” Clint nodded at them.

“They were the problem.” Tony murmured, “I used Palladium as a core. The only thing I had available at the time. And the only thing that worked. But it’s a poison. It was keeping me alive, but killing me at the same time.”

“And now?” Clint breathed in horror. The idea that what was saving Tony was killing him was heart-wrenching.

“I created something new for it to run on.” Tony shrugged, “Rhodey gave me a kick in the right direction to make something that would work. Hardware problem.”

“Not software.” Clint blinked; Rhodey’s cryptic remark finally making sense.

“Exactly.”

“Couldn’t you just have surgery? Get rid of the shrapnel and therefore the need for that in the first place?”

“I’ve sent scans of my injury to the best medical doctors in the field,” Tony replied, “They all agree the only solution to this would be a full lung and heart transplant. The list of waiting recipients is long. Very long. I don’t have the right to bump someone off the top of that list. I don’t have the right to deny them a life. I at least *have* a life. Yes, it’s not perfect and it’s not all that comfortable to have such a tangible reminder of my captivity thrown in my face every day. I deserve this. This is the result of my arrogance. Of my pride. Of my stupidity. Of my naivety. I earned this. With my narcissism. With my self-indulgence. This is my burden. This is my penance.

“But it’s also my source of strength. I built this. I rescued myself. I saved myself. I was strong. I was not weak. I did not lie down. I did not give in. I stood firm. I stood proud. I beat them. I won.”

“Yes, you did.” Clint agreed.

Okay, and he was going to *insist* that SHIELD rewrite Tony’s psychological profile. The man was far stronger than they had realized. And far more prone to self-deprecation than was healthy.

Both weaker and stronger than anyone had ever guessed. Tony was a walking study in contradictions. Who knew?

"Tony, you have nothing to worry about." Clint declared firmly, "Steve won't be repulsed by it. It's beautiful. And after you explain why you need it, Steve will love it. It's keeping you alive. That by itself is enough for him to admire and respect it. That it is so beautiful by itself is completely irrelevant to the topic. You have nothing to fear… May I touch it?"

"Go ahead." Tony's voice was tense, but he was clearly trying not to let his fear show.

Slowly, almost reverently, Clint's fingers danced over the cool surface of the device.

"You built this in a cave?"

"The first one, yes."

"God, you are a genius." Clint pulled away, "And this is what you've been scared of? Idiot! Steve won't care. Trust me."

"I do." Tony seemed to surprise himself with the words, "Jarvis, can you organise dinner for me and Steve tomorrow night?"

"Very good, Sir." The English voice spoke up, "May I enquire about what type of cuisine you would desire?"

"Surprise me." Tony waved a hand at the air, as he put his vest back on.

"Who is that?" Clint asked.

"Jarvis." Tony shrugged.

"I got that part." Clint sighed, "But where is he?"

"Just A Rather Very Intelligent System." Tony declared softly, "He's not human. He's my home computer system. An AI. He runs the security in this whole building. The security men out front are the visible aspect of the system. Jarvis is the invisible. No-one who doesn't live in this building can get to any other floor than the one they are invited to. The doors to the stairs are controlled by him. The lift is controlled by him. He runs the security cameras and the alarm systems. If it's electrical and in this building, Jarvis has access."

Clint blinked in surprise and shock. Internally he wondered at the full capabilities of Jarvis. If he (it?) was running the security then he (it?) was clearly a very complicated system. Clint also came to the conclusion that unless he was told otherwise he would continue to consider Jarvis a male entity. Simply for his peace of mind.

"Jarvis?" Clint looked upwards, for lack of a face to address, "Could you please call me Clint?"

"Would Mister Clint be an acceptable compromise?" Jarvis returned, "I could not be so informal."

"I'll accept Mister Clint." Clint nodded.

"Very good, Mister Clint." Jarvis declared, "Sir, I would like to point out, yet again that you have yet to eat since you awoke."

"I've eaten!" Tony protested

"A smoothie from Dum-E does not count as a meal, Sir." Jarvis retorted, "I have no desire to inflict your unconscious person on Mister Clint as I have to implore him to return you to your Penthouse, in order to sleep in a proper bed."

"I have a very comfy couch down here. That's what it's *there* for!"

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis sounded highly sarcastic, "Why would anyone desire to sleep in a bed? The idea itself is ludicrous."

"Come on," Clint wrapped an arm around Tony's shoulders, "I'll make you my world famous breakfast buttie. It'll be great, I promise you. Then we can watch some movies. You've got a whole life to live. Let's get out of here for a bit. I get to thinking you've spent far too much time in places like this recently."

Tony conceded and allowed Clint to steer him into the lift. Clint willingly left the bow behind, not even thinking about it.

Besides, it wasn't the right size or draw-weight for him.

Chapter 9: Chapter 8

It still took Tony another week before he confessed to Steve what lay beneath his shirts.

However that wasn't Tony's fault. The day after Tony's reveal to Clint, Iron Man emerged from his month long sabbatical and started causing chaos on a much faster timeline than he ever had before.

The Behavioural Analysis people had gone on about acceleration and possible devolution. All Clint knew was that it was frustratingly happening at the wrong time.

Fortunately Tony didn't seem too perturbed by the fact that work was getting in the way. Even if he didn't know what they really did he respected their dedication to the work. Even if it was only troubleshooting for an international company involved in security work.

Clint quite liked the cover. It provided mystic and romanticism. They apparently checked security at banks and embassies around the world and analysed incursions, and they also provided direct security for people who requested it. In a strange way it was actually highly accurate and suitable.

As it was, Clint knew when Tony had confessed, because Steve sought Clint out and sat down opposite the archer.

"He showed you then." Clint said softly.

"Yes." Steve breathed, "Yes. God, what kind of hell…?"

"The kind he walked away from." Clint reminded, "That's what you need to remember, Cap. He didn't break. He walked out of there. On his own. He rescued himself. Tony's tough… For a civilian."

"You're right." Steve agreed, "He's strong. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to have *been* there. To have protected him. To save him. Because nobody should have to have gone through that. Especially not Tony."

Internally Clint had to agree. But then again he was slightly overprotective of the genius. The man often came over as incredibly child-like in nature, which while many people would probably deem it to be annoying, Clint found it remarkably endearing. It made him want to mother-hen the civilian, in a purely platonic manner.

Besides Tony wasn't his type. Horrendously competent and easily overlooked; the Everyman's Everyman on the other hand *was*.

"The thing is," Clint sighed, "I don't think anyone else *could* have coped. Could have survived. I think that Tony was the only person in the *world* who could have walked out the way he did."

"That doesn't make it any better." Steve murmured.

"I know." Clint laughed bitterly, "But he survived. That's what you have to hold onto. What *we* have to hold onto. He survived. And he lives. And we're going to *keep* him that way. That's what we do every day. We make the world a better place for people like Tony."

"Even if they don't know exactly who we are or what we do." Steve agreed.

The two of them sat in mutual, comfortable silence for a long while.

"It is beautiful though." Steve muttered.

"I know." Clint agreed, "Hauntingly so."

"Do I have to worry about you crushing on him?" Steve raised an eyebrow.

"Not my type." Clint laughed, "Just think of me as the protective, bratty brother."

"For which one of us?"

"Do I have to choose?" Clint asked.

Steve only chuckled in response.

"It does remind me of something though." Clint's voice was soft.

"What?" Steve pressed.

“I can’t remember.” Clint shrugged.

“Nor can I.” Steve sighed, “It can’t be important though if both of us can’t remember.”

“Yeah,” Clint smiled, “It can’t be.”

123456789

About two weeks later, Clint found himself in the vents over Fury’s office.

For official purposes no less. Something that seemed very strange to the archer, considering how much work Fury went to to try and keep Clint *out* of the vents generally.

However when Stark walked into the office, Clint understood.

Because it *was* Stark. It wasn’t the kind, generous, slightly withdrawn Tony.

This was loud and bold and cock-sure and confident Stark. Arrogant and dismissive of people.

And a bloody good mask in Clint’s opinion. Having known Tony for as long as he had and as well as he did though, he could spot the little cracks in the mask. The chinks in the armour.

It was mainly in the eyes, which explained why Tony hadn’t taken his shades off. But with his angle, Clint could see over the shades and to Tony’s eyes, which were flickering around, looking for escape routes and clearly feeling outnumbered by the double escort that was guarding the door, Fury and his aide (who was actually Hill).

Clint’s blood was starting to simmer. Fury knew every detail about Tony that Clint had deemed pertinent enough to pass on (Tony’s preference in sandwiches and pizzas was not pertinent, nor was the exact stage of Steve’s and Tony’s relationship, although he did know that they were past hand-holding).

So the posturing, positioning of Tony so that he couldn't see the door or the guards were deliberately being used to put Tony on the defensive. To make him feel small and weak.

And there was the next stage, Fury dismissed the two guards at the door. Thus making Tony feel safer and better. Thus making Tony feel indebted to Fury so that he would be more willing to agree to whatever Fury wanted.

"So, Cyclops," Stark snarked, "What do you want? What is all this cloak and dagger stuff actually in aid of?"

"I want you to build me an Iron Man."

"Whoa," Stark held up both of his hands, "One, I don't do weapons any more. Two, I'm not involved with Stark Industries any more. Three, you want me to reverse engineer a design I cannot take to pieces, because I'm fairly certain you don't have one. Four, you want me to reverse engineer a design I have not even seen in person. I'm good… Hell, I'm a freaking *genius*! But something just aren't possible."

"One, you're the best in your field. Two, I don't care that you're not involved with Stark Industries any more, I'm sure you've got a lab. Three, you're smart enough to solve that problem. Four, you're smart enough to solve that problem. Some things aren't possible. But this is possible. And I want you to do it."

"I'm not easily brought." Tony laid the file back down, "This puzzle doesn't interest me."

"He's attacking your company."

"And I should care why?" Stark raised an eyebrow, "Give me one good reason to do so."

Fury pushed a file over the table towards Tony, who waited for a long moment and picked it up and rifled through the sheets inside.

"And I should care why?" Stark challenged, "I'm a narcissist. I don't care about anyone other than me."

"What about Rogers?" Fury challenged.

"Who?"

“Steve Rogers,” Fury laid another file down on the desk, “You thought you disappeared? We’ve been watching you Stark. We’ve always been watching you. Howard Stark was a part of this organisation from the beginning. He was one of the founders. We have been watching you your whole life.”

“Not all of it.” Tony smirked.

And Clint knew that Tony was right. Even if SHIELD had been watching Tony since the day he was born, they were still missing three months. And then there were the months, which Fury wasn’t confessing to not knowing about, when Tony had managed to disappear.

“And if you’re trying the whole: ‘This is what your father would have wanted’ speech,” Stark continued, “Find yourself another audience. Because this one isn’t listening. My father didn’t love me. My father didn’t care for me. The happiest day of his life that involved me was when he shipped me off to boarding school at age eight. I feel no need to impress my father any more. He stopped being an important influence in my life a long time ago. He died to me many years before he put himself into the ground. And don’t even get me *started* on my mother.”

“So you have issues,” Fury retorted, “That still doesn’t change the fact that you have obligations. You can do this. And you will do this. Howard always said that when it came down to it, you were someone we could rely on.”

Tony leaned back in the chair, clearly thinking about something.

“I want two conditions.” Tony stated.

“What are they?” Fury pressed.

“You agree to them or you don’t get your Iron Man.” Tony fired back, “I will also need your files on Iron Man.”

“We cannot simply hand over classified files…”

“I’m not asking for details like dates and times and places.” Tony countered, “I want all the data you have on the specifications of the suit.”

“We do not have such information.” Hill put in, “We have been unable to run tests on it. Seeing as it is used by our enemy.”

“But I bet you have recordings,” Tony challenged, “That someone’s used a speed-gun on him. That you’ve measured the altitude he’s reached. That you know his rough height.

That you know what weapons cause damage and which ones don't. *That's* what I'm after. Details that will allow me to know what I'm aiming for."

"What is the condition?" Fury asked.

"Two conditions." Tony corrected.

"The first condition was the files." Fury pointed out.

"No," Tony shook his head, "That is what I *need*. The conditions are what I *want*. The first condition is simple, this is the last time that SHIELD asks me for a weapon."

"We can't just…"

"Yes, you can." Tony cut Hill off, "You can come to me for armour, shields, engines, transport, computers, communications, firewalls, programs, prosthetics, spy-gadgets. Anything you like. Unless it is designed to kill someone, or even physically hurt them."

"And the second?" Fury's voice was cold, but Clint could tell that he was considering the offer.

"I decide who gets to pilot the suit." Tony declared.

"No." Fury snapped, "We choose the pilot."

"Compromise," Tony leaned forward slightly, "I choose a pilot. You assess them and then give me a reason *why* they can't be the pilot. If my choice has failed to be up to snuff you can then choose who you like. But I promise you, I will not make a wrong decision. I have no intentions of putting my weapons into the wrong hands."

"You provide the suit and the pilot and we'll assess them." Fury rose, clearly indicating an end to the meeting, "I agree to your conditions. I'll have an Agent deliver the files once we have collated them."

Stark stood up and almost swaggered out the office. Fury watched him go, before he turned to address the vents.

"Agent Barton, front and centre." Fury snapped.

Clint emerged and fell into a ready stance in front of the Director.

"Your assessment."

“He’ll do it.” Clint stated, “He’s not happy about it. He’s *really* not happy about it. But he’ll do it. Sir, I do not approve of the intimidation tactics you used here to get his agreement.”

“We need the advantage.” Fury countered, “Your personal attachment is not one I particularly care if I damage. Stark is the best mind alive. And God help me, but I’ll never tell him. His ego couldn’t take the boost.”

“And I still maintain,” Clint returned calmly, “That I don’t care how many so-called experts you’ve sent to profile Tony, every single one of them was wrong in their assessment.”

Chapter 10: Chapter 9

Clint was slightly surprised to receive a text from Tony that evening.

It wasn't that he was surprised to get a text from Tony. The genius seemed to prefer texting to phoning. He'd said he didn't want to disturb them when they could be working. Clint thought it was because Tony could think out his words better.

The surprise was that it seemed that Tony hadn't thought about his words as much as he usually did. Tony's texts always made him come across as controlled and in control.

"Please come. Need company." Wasn't a text Tony would normally send. It spoke of loneliness and fear and desperation.

Which, *yes*, Tony did feel, but he never let people know. Because if he let people know then they could take advantage of that.

Clint was certain that he broke speed laws as he rushed over to Tony's, but he wasn't the only one. He met Steve in the garage, just getting off his bike.

"You get his text?" Steve asked.

"Yeah." Clint nodded.

"Any idea what's twisted him around like this?"

"Some," Clint shrugged, "I'll fill you in later. Right now, we need to concentrate on Tones."

They rode up in the lift silently. Clint perfectly still, Steve shifting his weight almost constantly. A clear sign that both of them were worried and upset.

Once in the penthouse they both headed unerringly for the Den. It was where they found Tony sitting on the floor, wrapped in a blanket staring blankly ahead.

Steve moved to sit down next to Tony, gently reaching out to touch Tony's hand, clearly not wanting to set off Tony's PTSD. No matter how much better he had gotten, he still could have a set-back.

Clint went to the kitchen to make hot-chocolate. Surprisingly one of Clint's specialities when it came to the kitchen. Tony was *still* trying to figure out the secret ingredient that made it taste so good (Cinnamon).

"Come on back to us, Tony." Steve implored as Clint handed out the mugs, "What's upset you? What's the matter? How can we help?"

"What… What are you doing here?" Tony blinked.

"You texted us." Clint shrugged, "So we came. You said you needed us."

"I never sent that text." Tony shook his head weakly, "I wrote it. I never sent it."

"I sent it, Sir." Jarvis' voice came over the speakers, "You were clearly distressed and wanted company beyond what I and the bots could provide. I took the liberty of obtaining what you required, Sir."

"Remind me to rewrite your coding Jarvis." Tony muttered, "You think too much."

"Sir, that *is* what you designed me for. To assist you in your research and to take care of you."

"Sorry to inconvenience you." Tony murmured, "I'm okay."

"No, you are *not*!" Steve insisted, "You're shaking. Physically shaking. Whatever you want… Whatever you *need*… I'm willing to provide it. Tony, we're beyond this. You know that."

"I've been asked to build a weapon." Tony confessed.

Clint was slightly tense, while he knew what was going on, Tony didn't know that he knew. Therefore Tony was not allowed to give details. He didn't want to have to report that Tony had breached confidentiality. He was sure there was a clause in the contract somewhere against that.

“Who?” Steve demanded, “I *know* you don’t want to do that anymore. You don’t have to. Just turn them down.”

“I can’t.” Tony shook his head, “I have to do this.”

“No you don’t. Just turn them down.” Steve repeated.

“It’s too late.” Tony laughed bitterly, “I already signed the contract. A few extra conditions of my own. But it’s done and dusted. I’m building it.”

“Why?” Steve breathed, “Who? Who wants you to do this?”

“I can’t tell you who.” Tony took a sip of his drink, “I can’t tell you what I’m building. But I got them to agree that this is the last weapon they will ever ask of me.”

“You’ve worked for them before?”

“Regular for SI.” Tony shrugged, “At least they knew to come to the best, rather than to go to the company.”

“Why?” Steve tried again.

“It protects Pepper.” Tony breathed softly.

“Pepper?” Clint frowned. He didn’t remember anyone with a name like that in Tony’s files.

“Miss Potts.” Tony replied, “I either called her that, or Pepper. Usually Pepper. She was my Personal Assistant. I hired her for that role after she forced her way past security guards with pepper-spray to tell me that I’d made an error in my calculations. She found an error I’d made and not spotted. And she knew enough to know it was wrong. And she was feisty enough to make sure that no-one stopped her getting to me to get it corrected. She was the one person I had to leave behind.”

“What?” Steve was confused.

“When I ‘disappeared’,” Tony explained, “I had three people who wanted to know where I was going and who cared enough to ask and who meant enough to me for me to tell them: Rhodey, Happy and Pepper. Rhodey’s Air Force, he couldn’t come, but he can visit. Happy became the Head of Security for this building; keeping me safe. He enjoys it. Pepper I asked to stay behind. The company needed her more than me.”

“If she’s just a secretary,” Clint pressed, “Why would the company need her?”

“A company with a lousy CEO and a good Secretary will still manage to run successfully. A company with a good CEO and a lousy Secretary stands a fair to even chance at going belly up very quickly.” Tony explained, “Pepper’s the best. SI needed her more than I did. However Stane isn’t fond of her. They promised that if I did this project they’d make

sure that Pepper is kept on at SI. That she'd stay where she is currently placed and where she is needed. However if she gets a promotion they won't interfere."

"You're doing this for Pepper?" Steve gently pulled Tony into a hug, "You're a good man."

"Why are you so gun-shy?" Clint asked gently, "I mean I get the fact that you got hurt, but I still get the feeling that there's something I don't know."

Tony closed his eyes and leaned further back into Steve's comforting embrace.

"I've never told anyone this," He started, "Not even Rhodey. When the convoy was attacked in Afghanistan, I wasn't all that injured in the initial blast. I was even conscious. I saw the bomb that landed near me. The bomb that exploded and almost killed me. It had Stark printed on the side. But more than that, it was a design I recognised. A design I knew. It was conceived in my brain. Fashioned by my hands. Manufactured in one of my factories. Intended to be the sword of the American Military and their allies. But instead used against them, by the very enemies they were fighting."

"Oh God." Clint gulped.

No *wonder* Tony had issues. No *wonder* he had declared that he was killing himself.

"It only gets worse," Tony laughed bitterly, "When they took me through their cave, I saw dozens of dozens of boxes. All with that name branded on them: Stark. My weapons. My creations being used against the very people I intended to use them. Used against innocents who had no ability to fight back."

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Steve pressed.

"Because it's just my word." Tony shrugged, "Just the word of an ego-centric, narcissistic capitalist. The word of the "Merchant of Death". I would have been accused of, at best, lying; at worst, having sold the Ten Rings those weapons myself. Besides, I have PTSD, maybe the trauma is getting to me."

Both SHIELD operatives could hear the mocking in Tony's last sentence. It was clear that the genius knew how his words could be easily dismissed.

“How do you think they got hold of them?” Steve queried.

“Only two ways,” Tony stated, “One, someone in the military stole them and sold them to Weapons Dealers. Two, someone in SI sold them under the table. Quite frankly I’d prefer the first.”

“Why?” Clint demanded, “You think having traitors in the military is better?”

“No,” Tony shook his head, “But the opportunity for such theft would be much smaller. There’d be fewer of my weapons out there in the wrong hands. And it wouldn’t be the big stuff. It’d be the smaller stuff that could be smuggled out easier. So no things like tanks or planes.

“Also if it’s someone in SI, that means they have to be of a sufficiently high rank to be able to cook the books to make the numbers all match up. We’d notice the discrepancy otherwise. And everyone of that rank or above is someone I know personally. I’d much rather be betrayed by someone I’ve never met than by someone I’ve trusted enough to put them *into* that position of power.”

That Clint could understand. Tony would rather an anonymous betrayal rather than a betrayal by a colleague. It made sense. Because the anonymous betrayal would hurt a great deal less.

“I don’t want innocent people to be hurt by my weapons again.” Tony whispered, “But it keeps on happening. That’s what caused my breakdown. Christine showed me some footage of my weapons being used against innocent civilians. Against Gulmira.”

“Gulmira?” Steve pressed gently, “Who’s that?”

“It’s a small village in Afghanistan.” Tony replied, “Yinsen came from there.”

“Who’s Yinsen?”

“A better man than I will ever be.” Was Tony’s only response, whispered so quietly that Clint nearly didn’t hear it.

Any further information was not forthcoming. Tony simply curled up next to Steve and ignored the soft questions that Steve and Clint asked.

In fact he only said one other thing before he fell asleep in Steve’s arms.

“I love you.”

“I know.” Steve returned, causing a sleepy smile to grace Tony’s face.

Chapter 11: Chapter 10

The next afternoon found Steve and Clint in Steve's apartment nursing cups of coffee.

"He's terrified." Steve murmured.

"No," Clint shook his head, "Determined and shaken. But not terrified. He doesn't want to be hurt by a weapon of his own manufacture again."

"Who would ask him to *do* this?"

"We would." Clint sighed, "SHIELD would. I saw it go down."

"Why?"

"Fury wants an Iron Man of his own."

"Tony can't do that." Steve muttered, "Even I know that reverse engineering requires something to work *from*!"

"He's a genius." Clint closed his eyes, "We've worked alongside Reed Richards before, remember?"

"Yes."

"Tony's as smart if not smarter." Clint explained, "Personally I'd say smarter. But that's mainly because Richards focuses on the theoretical. Tony's all about the practical. Richards would spend years studying a weapon to find out everything about it down to how its development reflects and affected the culture that it came from. Tony would take it to pieces, figure out how it works, how it was made and how to improve it. That's the difference between them."

"Richards is nothing like Tony."

"I know. I actually like Tony. Richards grates. Look, most of this is my fault."

"Why?"

"Because I reported that I saw a bow in Tony's lab."

"Workshop." Steve interrupted, "He calls it his workshop."

"Okay," Clint nodded, "His workshop. Tony told me he built that after seeing Hawkeye at work. I reckon that Fury figured that if Tony had studied Hawkeye and built a bow that he definitely would be working on an Iron Man suit. At least the theoretical. To be honest, I think he's right."

“It’ll still take months.” Steve reminded, “Tony’s going to be going through Hell making this thing for months.”

“Months?” Clint raised an eyebrow, “My high bet is going to be two months. My low is one. I told you he’s a genius.”

“Howard couldn’t do something like that.”

“Tony’s not Howard.” Clint shook his head, “Don’t even think it. From what I’ve read… Comparing Tony to Howard is like comparing a University Professor to a Freshman. Don’t do that. I think that’s partly why the two of them didn’t get along all that great. I think that Howard could see that Tony was smarter than him and was intimidated.”

“Why?” Steve demanded, “Howard was never intimidated by me and I was stronger than him. He held his own no matter how much better anyone was in a particular field. Why would he be intimidated by his own son?”

“Because,” Clint was insistent, “Howard was always the smartest man in the room. So to suddenly find that he wasn’t? That the one thing he’d built his reputation and livelihood on was no longer the case? That must have rocked his world. I think that’s what happened. But I wasn’t there. I don’t know. All I can do is psychobabble. Which I’m not fond of.”

The two sat in silence for a long time.

“He’s really that smart?” Steve whispered.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Clint snorted, “Especially considering that the two of us have seen him staring at a Chinese Finger trap and trying to work out how to free his fingers for over an hour.”

“He was half asleep.” Steve defended.

“I know. But that didn’t and doesn’t make it any less funny.” Clint reminded, “And yes. He really is that smart.”

“How hard do you think it would be to go and punch Fury in the face?” Steve asked.

“One, very.” Clint started counting off on his fingers, “Two, I want to watch. Three, can I record it? I don’t like what Fury’s doing to Tony either.”

“You two are like brothers.”

“He’s very likable.” Clint shrugged, “Oh, and Tony also stated that he got to pick the person inside the suit. He agreed that SHIELD would be able to test them, but otherwise he gets first refusal.”

“You think he’ll pick one of us?”

“It’s a logical option. But I wouldn’t want to be in a big, bulky suit. No matter how graceful Iron Man manages to make his manoeuvres. And is it just me or does that man change his suits more often than some women change their hair?”

“It’s not just you.” Steve laughed, “Though I guess if we’ve managed to damage it he’s got to repair it. So he probably tries to improve it.”

“Guess so.” Clint agreed

“I wish I knew what his goal was.”

“Join the club.”

123456789

About two weeks later, Steve was pounding on Clint’s (read: Phil’s) door.

“What is it?” Clint looked out bleary eyed.

“I need you to come with me.” Steve declared, “I need… I need…”

“Civilian or SHIELD?” Clint murmured, barely audible.

“Civilian.” Steve replied quickly, “I just need a friend.”

“Can’t Tony do it?”

“Not this?” Steve shook his head, “It’s too risky.”

“Risky for what?” Clint blinked, “You said it was Civilian.”

“Too risky that Tony would find out about… You know.” Steve waved a hand desperately.

Despite Steve’s *complete* lack of clues, Clint managed to piece together the problem. Wherever they were going to go, because there was no doubt that Clint *was* going, there was a risk that Steve’s identity was going to be exposed.

Clint sighed, grabbed a fairly well equipped rucksack by the door and left the house. He easily swung up behind Steve on his bike and thanked his lucky stars that he preferred comfortable boots and jeans as he would be protected should the worse come to the worse and there was an accident.

Steve passed him the spare helmet and they set off.

"Where are we going?" Clint asked after a long period of silence.

"What do you know about the Howling Commandos?"

"Pretty much what everyone knows." Clint shrugged, "May be a bit more, seeing as how I live with one of the most intense Captain America fans around."

"How many of them are still alive?"

"Officially?" Clint thought it through, "None of them. Or at least none of the official Howling Commandos. Peggy Carter is still alive, but I don't know where she is living. As far as I know, no-one does."

"That's what I thought." Steve ended the conversation.

It was a long drive, but Clint was used to long periods of inactivity and observation so he was, although bored, not too upset at the silence. Steve was naturally a quiet person anyway. Intensely so. Particularly when distressed.

Though Clint was surprised when Steve paused outside a very large estate, the imposing gates firmly closed; this wasn't a place he had expected to end up at.

The sign on the wall marked the place as "Crocker's Folly".

Leaning forward, Steve pressed the button for the intercom system.

"Steve Rogers and guest, visiting?" It was clearly a question.

"You were expected, sir." The response came back quickly, "Please enter."

The grounds inside the walls were as lush as the outside projected. But also a lot more homely and country than Clint expected. Steve drove them right up the drive to the main house entrance, past several turnings off towards what looked like small house clusters.

Entering the house, Clint noted that it was laid out rather like a posh, country hotel. But again with more homeliness than Clint was imagining. Then again, he hadn't been in many posh, country hotels. Not for long anyway and not usually through the front door.

Everything looked different behind the scenes after all.

"Good afternoon, sir." The man behind the desk was crisp and polite, "I was instructed to inform you that you are expected in the Barnes Room."

Clint felt a shiver run down his spine at the comment. He saw Steve stiffen as he took in the statement.

As one the pair of them, followed the directions they were given.

"Steve," Clint murmured, "What's going on? I'll back your play. No matter what it is. But I need to know what the play is."

"No play." Steve breathed, "Just honesty. I just needed a friend to stand with me."

Steve pushed open the door.

Inside were three men. Two immediately, albeit slowly, rose to their feet and saluted. The other saluted from his wheelchair.

"Captain." They all declared.

Chapter 12: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“At ease.” Steve whispered as Clint shut the door.

“Who’s your friend, Cap?” The black man asked, as they sat back down again.

“Call him Clint, Gabe.” Steve replied, “I missed you.”

“Not as sorely as we missed you, Captain.” The Asian stated, “You’ve only had a year or so to miss us. We’ve missed you for over seventy years.”

“Clint,” Steve turned to face the Archer, “Meet the Howling Commandos. Gabriel ‘Gabe’ Jones. James ‘Jim’ Morita. Montgomery ‘James’ Falsworth.”

“You’re all meant to be dead.” Clint breathed.

“You can thank the kid for that.” James smiled, “He’s kept us safe. All of us.”

“The kid?” Steve frowned.

“Our kid.” Jim put in, “Our boy. Howard’s by blood. But ours by right. He came to each of us, long time ago, and said he wanted to give us a place where we were safe. Where we were looked after. Where we could disappear.”

“He had good timing too.” Gabe agreed, “As much as I enjoyed doing what we did and I have many fond memories of our time as the Howling Commandos… I hated the rehashing of what we did every ten years or so. The interviews. The press. The hounding.”

“Tony offered us a retreat from all of that.” James stated, “We officially died. Our families know, and they visit often. But they don’t tell. My wife’s here.”

“Mine too.” Gabe nodded.

“If we’d still been known to be around when you made your come-back tour,” Jim smirked, “We’d have been interviewed and hounded all over again. Only ten times worse.”

“Are you alright, Cap?” Gabe asked gently.

“I should be asking you that.” Steve sank into a chair.

“It’s just old age, Steve.” James smiled, “Takes us all, given time. Took Dum-Dum. Jacques went down fighting in a kidnapping of all things. Though he’d say it was worth it.”

“It was,” Gabe agreed, “They didn’t get away. That was the important thing.”

“What we want to know, Captain,” Jim leaned forward in his chair slightly, “Is what your intentions are towards our boy. Our Tony.”

“Yours?” Clint queried.

“Steve always insisted Howard was one of us. An Unofficial Howling Commando.” Jim explained, “Just like Peggy was. When Tony was born, all of our children were grown or nearly so. We tried to be there for Tony as much as possible. But all too often we were refused access.”

“Why?” Steve demanded, “Who dared?”

“Howard.” Gabe was blunt, “Cap, he changed. He wasn’t the man we knew. He was obsessed with finding you. When each of us, over time, gave up on finding you he would block us out. Anyone who didn’t believe that you were still alive and could still be found wasn’t worth talking to, as far as Howard was concerned. And yes he was *right* about you, but that didn’t mean he had a reason for shutting us all out like that.”

“Peggy was the only one who never said he should stop.” James put in, “But she started getting dementia. And it progressed *fast*, by the time Tony left MIT, everything that kept Peggy in the here and now was gone.”

“It hurts Tony seeing her.” Gabe declared, “Because all she sees is Howard. Sometimes she asks when you’re due back from a mission. Sometimes she begs him to find you. Sometimes she asks how baby Tony is.”

“He can’t stay with her long.” James closed his eyes in grief, “We don’t ask him to. She’s like that with most of us. Sometimes she recognises us. Sometimes she doesn’t. She asked my grandson last week why he’d shaved his moustache. He’s never worn one. But he looks so like me…”

“She’s trapped in her own mind.” Clint breathed in horror.

“Yes.” Jim agreed, “She’s safe here. All of the staff are carefully vetted to make sure that none of them would steal her secrets. All visitors are checked and double checked. Even the other residents are screened for security risks.”

“This place was meant to be a sanctuary for us.” Gabe was firm, “That being said, Captain, what are your intentions towards our Tony? Because if you’re just using him…”

“Never.” Steve shook his head, “I love him. I want to be with him all the days of his life.”

Clint stared; for while he had seen this coming for a long time, he’d never actually heard the words spoken aloud.

“He loves you.” James smiled softly, “We’ve been hearing about ‘Steve’ in the few conversations we’ve had with Tony I think from virtually when you met.”

“I’ve never known that boy to fall so hard and so fast.” Gabe laughed, “But then again, he’s got Howard’s decisiveness. Once he sets his feet on a path, it takes a lot to make him stray from it.”

“We never thought that his Steve could be our Captain.” Jim agreed, “And he never will. You are keeping it from him for a reason?”

“He would react,” Steve explained, “He would treat Captain America differently. Someone could figure it out and try to use him against me. I don’t want him hurt because of me. I have to keep him safe. He’s… Precious to me. I love him.”

“Good.” Gabe was firm, “He needs that. *Deserves* that.”

“You… You aren’t disgusted?” Steve breathed.

“No.” James shook his head, “Times have changed. Besides we all thought that you and Bucky were a little closer than regulations allowed.”

“I never thought of Bucky like that.” Steve half-protested, “We were brother. Not lovers. And you never said anything.”

“You saved us.” Jim snorted, “Came after us when everyone else had written us off. Yes, it was mainly for Bucky. But you didn’t leave us behind either. How could we hate something like that?”

“And we can see that we were wrong now.” James reassured, “But back then… You two always shared quarters. And when there was only one bed in there you never needed a bed-roll.”

“We shared a flat in Brooklyn for years.” Steve countered, “And there wasn’t heating. In the winter, we shared a bed to keep warm. Those quarters weren’t exactly warm either. And yes, I was smaller before, but we made it work. It was also… Comforting. We weren’t doing anything.”

“We’ll take your word for it, Captain.” Jim laughed, “God, you still blush like a freaking Catholic schoolgirl.”

“We’ve never told anyone our suspicions.” James added, “Didn’t want anyone disrespecting your memories. Either of you.”

“Actually…” Gabe held an apologetic hand up.

“You didn’t!” Jim accused, “Gabe!”

“It was my granddaughter,” Gabe shrugged, “She came to me after her parents, my son and daughter-in-law, chucked her out for having a girlfriend. She asked me if she was broken. If she was diseased… I couldn’t leave her like that. So I told her about the Captain

and Bucky and what we believed. It made her feel better. I swore her to secrecy. And told her that the only thing I cared about was that her girlfriend treated her right. Told her that if she broke my little granddaughter's heart I'd break her legs. They got married last year."

"Married?" Steve blinked, "I thought Civil Partnerships…"

"Law got changed." Gabe replied, "It's not legal in all the states. But New York legalised it in 2011."

"Then I'd better go buy a ring." Steve declared firmly.

For a long moment there was silence.

"I think he's actually serious." Jim breathed in shock.

"I am." Steve replied.

"Well," James shrugged, "Tony's made the ultimate commitment… Bringing him here."

"What do you mean?" Clint frowned.

"We're the most hidden part of Tony's family." James explained, "The ones he protects the most fiercely. I mean, we can handle ourselves… Or at least we could. But we're older than we were. Tony feels that he has a duty to keep us safe. So he built this place for us. Even named it for us."

"The pub," Steve smiled softly, "Where I asked you all to follow me into the jowls of death."

"And we all agreed." Jim nodded, "Never regretted that decision once in my whole life, Cap. I never will."

"Will Tony know ever about Captain America?" Gabe pressed.

"No," Steve shook his head, "I don't want him to. The less he knows the safer he is. He can't slip up with hasty words. He can't react in the wrong way. He can't tell what he doesn't know. It's the best way to keep him safe. His security is good. The best. But this will keep eyes off him."

"I think he's right." Jim agreed, "We all know Tony's smart. But he's better off not knowing. He'll worry less. What does he think you do?"

"Security analysis," Clint put in, "And security detail. Basically bodyguard work and improving-stroke-checking security systems."

“Seems reasonable enough.” James stated.

“But won’t Tony find it odd that Peggy recognised me?” Steve asked.

“No,” Clint sighed, “He’ll probably think that there’s a passing resemblance, if what they say about her memory is true.”

“I’ve had the same conversation with her five times in ten minutes before now.” Jim was almost mourning, “The woman we knew died a long time ago. Her body and brain just doesn’t know it.”

It sounded cruel, but Clint could see where they were coming from. It had to be frustrating to have known how brilliant Peggy Carter had been (as he had heard from Steve in the past) and to see her now, a mere shell of her former self, trapped in the past she could never return to and unable to realize the world was passing her by.

Clint didn’t want to see her. He didn’t want to tarnish the image he had of Peggy Carter by seeing what she had become. She was safe. She was most likely happy; Tony would have taken care of that.

What need was there for Clint to butt in? What need was there for Clint to see her humiliation? Even if she herself would not be humiliated, Clint would feel humiliated on her behalf.

He would keep his distance.

To be honest Clint was scared. To lose control of his body was something Clint knew was a possibility in his line of work. He was fearful of it. But the idea that he could lose control of his *mind*, that scared the Archer more than anything. He had been bruised and broken before; a mere shattered puppet of a human being. But he had still had his mind. He had still been able to resist.

“You’re always welcome here, Captain.” Jim declared, “Bring us news of our boy though. He doesn’t like to talk about himself here. Here he just listens or talks about you.”

“I will.” Steve promised.

The four soldiers then saluted each other once again, went through a round of man-hugs and then Steve and Clint left.

"Tony's a good man." Clint remarked, "He made all of this for them?"

"I think what Tony does and what Tony allows the public to see that he does are worlds apart from each other." Steve shrugged, "This is more than just throwing money at something."

"I'll say." Clint breathed in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

These guys just worked their way in. Sorry, not sorry.

Chapter 13: Chapter 12

Needless to say, Clint found himself being dragged along with Steve to go ring shopping not long after. The delay being caused, once again, by another Supervillain attack. This time it was actually Iron Man, who for some reason, was being a lot more active the last few weeks.

After going through shop after shop after shop, Clint was feeling decidedly put upon and frustrated.

"What are you *looking* for?" Clint snapped.

"The right one." Steve replied.

"And do you have any idea what that will look like?" Clint fired back, "Because I've seen you reject a ring for being too ornate and then reject the next one for being too plain. You don't want sapphires, because they can't compete with his blue. But diamonds are too common. Rubies make you think of blood. What are you looking for?"

"I don't know." Steve shook his head, "I don't want it to catch when he's working. So it can't be too raised. I don't want a plain band. And I want it to mean something. To both of us."

"For Gods' sake Steve!" Clint snapped, "It's like you're looking for the One Ring!"

Steve's eyes lit up and without another word he was up and running.

Clint took off after him, but gave up after a few hundred meters. There was no way he was going to catch the Super Soldier. Not when he was going at that pace. Which Clint knew wasn't even Steve's top speed.

He would just have to catch the man later and interrogate him as to what the decision had been. And how he had gotten there from Clint's rather frustrated and random statement.

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Steve, Hawkeye reflected about two weeks later, was annoyingly good at keeping a secret. Clint still didn't know what the ring Steve had found looked like. Only that the hopelessly in love man had brought it.

However that was *not* a subject Hawkeye should be thinking about. Not when Fury had called all of the Initiative Project into a meeting.

While they didn't know what it was about, Hawkeye had a suspicion. Tony had been spending a lot of time in his workshop since he was given the job. However the previous three nights, they had had movie nights.

Clint suspected that the Iron Man replica suit was finished.

"Stark has finished the armour." Fury declared.

"When?" Hawkeye pressed, because he was all about the details. It had absolutely *nothing* to do with the bets that Agent Barton had with the SHEILD bookies.

"A week ago." Fury stated, "We have been running the armour and its pilot through various tests. As well as augmenting its weapon system."

"Stark did not put enough weapons on it?" The Black Widow raised an eyebrow, "I am surprised."

"He completed the task we put to him." Fury stated firmly, "We asked for an Iron Man. He gave us an Iron Man. We augmented it to make it stronger and more suited to our purposes in hunting down the original."

"The pilot passed the tests?" Captain America asked.

"He did." Fury nodded, "Despite my initial misgivings as to Stark's choice of operative, he chose well. The man is a warrior. Fully prepared to fight for what is right. Is accustomed to following orders. And has previous exposure to experimental Stark Tech. He also has sufficient training to do basic repairs should the need arise. Stark was thinking when he made his decision. Not just about what was best for him, but also what was best for SHIELD."

Hawkeye and Captain America exchanged glances. They both rather doubted that Tony had had the best interests of SHIELD in mind when he'd made his decision. It was simply

fortunate that it had worked out that way. Or rather Tony had known how to present things so that it *seemed* to be in SHIELD's best interests.

"This is your new teammate." Fury continued, "Designation: War Machine."

And a War Machine it was. Bulkier than Iron Man, and in gunmetal grey with silver highlights, though those were more steel than silver. A large cannon came over the right shoulder and there were further weapons visible on the forearms. It was a startling contrast to Iron Man's hidden weapons. And where Iron Man's glowing chest and eyes were so light blue as to be nearly white, War Machine's were a dangerous, chilling red.

This was not a friendly suit. This was not a comforting suit. This was a suit built for war. For combat. For killing.

"War Machine," Fury motioned to the group, "This is the Initiative. You all have clearance to know who each other are, so I'll leave you to get acquainted. You *will* be working together. So if any of you have any issues with each other resolve them. Today."

With that Fury swept out the room, his coat billowing behind him. Clint was convinced the man took lessons from Severus Snape as to billowing cloaks.

"Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes," Captain America rose from his seat, "Welcome to the team."

"How did you know who I am?" War Machine's face plate slid up to reveal Rhodey's face, "Colonel Fury said that he had not informed anyone in the Initiative as to my identity."

"Your stance." Captain America shrugged.

"My stance?" Rhodey looked incredulous, "You could tell it was me just from how I stand in a freaking mechanised suit of armour?"

"It's a very distinctive stance." Captain America replied calmly.

"Masks off," Agent Coulson instructed, "Let's get this done quickly."

Hawkeye quickly shed his mask to become Agent Barton, though Clint was peaking through, purely because Rhodey was present.

Things had gotten a lot more complicated. Though to be fair they should have expected this. While Steve was Tony's lover (if they had gotten that far) and Clint was practically a brother, Rhodey was a far older friend and brother. And someone who had proven that Tony could trust him completely. Tony had clearly wanted to make sure that this particular weapon was never used against him.

"Steve?" Rhodey blinked in shock, "Clint? Natasha?… I see, so it was all a sham. At what point did you decide to break my little brother's heart?"

"Break his heart?" Steve retorted, "I just brought a ring. As soon as I find the right time I'm proposing. I never got involved with him for anything other than what it seemed. I love him. Anything after that has *nothing* to do with me."

"I'm with Steve." Clint held his hand up, "He knew nothing about Tony. Nothing beyond what the man himself told him, before I found out. And I got dragged around god only knows *how* many jewellery shops to find the *perfect* ring. And I still don't know what he's picked."

"You don't have the right to propose." Rhodey countered, "You haven't asked his family."

"I've been to the Folly." Steve countered, "They gave me permission."

"He took you to the Folly?" Rhodey breathed, "Okay, I wasn't expecting that."

"What Folly?" Natasha put in, "Seeing as how issues do not seem to be issues and we are now discussing our personal lives."

"The Folly is private." Rhodey cut off any further questions, "If you get to go there then Tony gives permission. I won't betray his secrets. He's going to hate me enough when he sees that I let someone else tinker with his Suit."

"Why would Stark care about something like that?" Natasha frowned, "It takes some of the work away from him. He does not enjoy working hard."

"Correction, lady," Rhodey snapped, "Tony loves tinkering. And if he makes you tech… If he *personally* designs and fabricates and refines tech for *you*… Then the highest insult to him, in his books, is to take that tech to someone else to work on. He'll complain and moan and whine about having to do maintenance. About how you've treated it. About anything and everything… Including the time he's using working on it. But he'll spend double or triple that. Whatever it takes so that it will *never* fail you. He will do anything and *everything* to make sure that it works. And therefore taking that away from him means that

you do not trust him or his tech to work for you. To protect you. And Fury handed my Suit over to Hammer. That's an even worse insult. Only thing worse would be to hand it over to Stone."

"Stone?" Steve frowned.

"Tiberius Stone." Rhodey shrugged, "Not that there's any fear of that. He went bankrupt years ago. Does Tony know about *any* of this?"

"No." Steve shook his head, "He can't tell what he doesn't know. This keeps him safe. No one will target him for my sake."

"I can see where you're coming from." Rhodey sighed, "I wish this wasn't necessary. But I understand the need for secrets. I just hope and pray he doesn't get hurt from this."

"How could he?" Clint asked, "No Supervillain knows our identities. And they never will. SHIELD protects its own."

"That is good to hear," Rhodey smiled slightly, "I do have to ask Steve… Was that comment about my stance a coincidence or a reference?"

"Reference," Steve grinned, "I like it when I can make a modern reference that only a few people get. Because then it's their ignorance. Not mine."

"Age of the Geek, baby!" Rhodey held out his hand for a fist-bump.

"Age of the Geek." Steve completed the action.

Clint rather got the feeling he was missing something. But he knew he would probably find out eventually. The important thing was that there wouldn't be any dissention in the team. They had common goals. One of the important ones being protecting Tony (though in Natasha's case it was more for everyone else's sake than her own caring).

Chapter 14: Chapter 13

Three weeks after that Hawkeye was in the vents over Fury's office once more. This time not by invitation, but from his own curiosity.

Stark had been summoned there once again.

"You failed, Stark." Fury barked almost the moment the door shut, "War Machine is not faster than Iron Man."

Hawkeye immediately knew what the conversation was about. The day before War Machine had managed to engage in combat with Iron Man. The Supervillain having made himself fairly scarce the last month or so. And on those occasions when he *had* been sighted he was always long gone before the Initiative had managed to arrive on scene.

But the day before Iron Man had still been there.

Hawkeye suspected that he had waited for them. Whether it was because he wanted to fight them, to test himself against War Machine or for some other purpose, Hawkeye wasn't sure. But he knew they hadn't come off the best in the altercation.

"I have seen the footage." Stark returned calmly, "It has been all over the media. You gave me an estimated speed for Iron Man significantly lower than that which he displayed yesterday. I engineered War Machine to travel at *least* twice as fast as that estimated speed in order to take into account the fact that Iron Man may have been holding back. However you then took my Suit and added weapons onto it. Weapons it did not need."

"We improved its equipment." Fury retorted, "It was meant to be a weapon not the armour that you designed. The additional weapons are needed for its purpose."

"Yet you did not anticipate that extra weapons would mean extra weight." Stark countered, "Extra weight requires additional power to keep the same level of speed. I am exceedingly pleased that even with your ridiculous *cannon* my Suit managed to maintain a speed of greater than that which you originally provided me with."

"Fix the problem."

“I cannot.” Stark snapped, “I was walking the fine line between power and speed to begin with. In order to increase the power supply I would need to remove some of the weapons I have already included or the necessary life-support systems, to keep the weight the same. I cannot increase the number of thrusters as they would be in awkward positions and throw off Rhodey’s manoeuvrability and reduce the amount of control he has in his flight. You made this problem. I have no method of fixing it, other than removing that which you added to cause the problem in the first place. Either solve it yourself, or live with it. Good day, Fury.”

Stark turned and strode out the room. Making, in Hawkeye’s opinion, a rather dramatic exit.

He could actually see both sides of the argument. It had gotten rather embarrassing when Iron Man had literally flown rings around War Machine. The Supervillain hadn’t even been attacking, just really, *really* annoying.

Hawkeye, though, had gotten in a spectacular shot with an exploding arrow. Which had caused Iron Man to give up his teasing and leave the area.

They hadn’t come off the winners. But they sure as hell hadn’t been the losers of that particular altercation.

In this altercation though, Hawkeye was going to say that Stark had been the victor.

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“Clint!” Tony nearly pounced on the Archer as he entered Tony’s penthouse, “Steve proposed!”

“He finally got around to it, huh?” Clint smiled, “I knew he was going to. Come on, where’s the ring? I want to see it. He’s been keeping it a secret, but saying it was perfect.”

Smiling, Tony reached to his neck and pulled out a chain.

“I didn’t want to damage it on my hand.” Tony explained at Clint’s puzzled look, “And I’d always be taking it off to work on something.”

Hanging off the silver chain was a ring. Vague memories of a similar ring tugged at Clint’s memory, but he couldn’t place it. The emerald stone and twin silver snakes with a flash of gold was familiar.

“I think I should know that.” Clint frowned, “But I can’t remember.”

“It’s the Ring of Barahir,” Tony clarified, “Aragorn’s Ring.”

“From Lord of the Rings!” Clint grinned in realization, “It’s perfect. All that is gold does not glitter.”

“Not all who wander are lost.” Tony agreed, “Perfect for me.”

Clint thought that the next line was more appropriate for Steve:

“The old that is strong does not wither.”

Though it wasn’t completely correct.

“You’re not lost anymore.” Clint reassured, “You’ll always have a home in Steve. And in me.”

“But you’re still looking for yours.” Tony quirked an eyebrow.

“Perhaps.” Clint shrugged.

“Oh, you *found* it.” Tony breathed, “But you haven’t claimed it. You’re in love. But she doesn’t know you love her.”

“*He* doesn’t know.” Clint corrected.

“Then tell him.” Tony replied.

“What if I ruin what we already have? We’re friends. Housemates. I don’t want to ruin that. I don’t want to lose him, because of something he cannot accept.”

“I was fifteen when I told Rhodey that I loved him.” Tony declared, “Fifteen and scared to death that he’d reject me and I’d never see him again. But I couldn’t live with the lie anymore. The lie that I only saw him as a friend. He let me down gently. We’re still the best of friends. Hell, we’re practically brothers! If he cannot accept who and what you are then he doesn’t deserve you. And he never did. Plus my place is available to you as a home, should you ever need it.”

“You really think I should take the risk?”

“I say you go home,” Tony smirked, “Walk right up to him and kiss him. Properly. It’s what I did to Rhodey. Didn’t fully work for me, but it shattered the ice. Got the conversation rolling. Go. Go now! We can talk later. Get you drunk if you need it. Celebrate if you don’t. Take a chance. Live for now. You never know how many days you have left. The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.”

It was hard to deny Tony’s comment. The last sentence was certainly something that Clint remembered hearing before to some degree.

He spent the entire journey home thinking about what Tony had said. He was weighing up the pros and cons of taking Tony’s advice.

However the moment he saw Phil, all the reasons in his mind that he had to ignore Tony’s advice went flying out of his head. He just charged forward, grabbed Phil and kissed him. His hands moving to hold Phil’s face still. He poured his entire heart and everything he was into that kiss.

It was perfection and beautiful and everything he had ever wanted. It was everything he had ever dreamed of. He imprinted every moment of it into his memory. If this was all he had, he didn’t want to ever forget a single second.

He then pulled back.

For a long moment nothing happened. There was perfect stillness. The two of them locking gazes. Clint was desperately trying to see something, *anything* in Phil’s eyes, other than the blankness that currently reigned.

Clint was starting to feel his heart sinking, the knowledge that Phil didn't feel the same way eating into his dreams. He would have to move out. He couldn't live with Phil knowing that the man didn't care for Clint the way the Archer cared for him. The distance would help Clint regain his equilibrium. Inwardly he was hoping that Tony's remark about the spare bed wasn't meant as a joke.

Clint lowered his hands, slowly. Not wanting to lose this last moment of contact.

Chapter 15: Chapter 14

Phil moved. But it was only his hands and arms he moved, one to grip the back of Clint's shirt, the other to tangle into the hair at the back of Clint's head.

He then pulled the Archer closer and they locked lips once again.

This wasn't something that Clint had ever dreamed of. It was more than he had ever dreamed of. More than he had ever hoped. Phil wasn't just kissing; he was pouring his heart and soul into it. Returning everything that Clint had given. Clint's eyes shut of their own accord.

"Took you long enough." Phil commented when he pulled back, "I thought I had just been imagining what I wanted to see in you."

"I never dared." Clint breathed, "I didn't want to ruin what we already had. And I never saw anything that indicated you were even remotely interested."

"I was showing enough signals." Phil countered, "Natasha picked up on them. She's been waiting for one of us to make the first move. What changed your mind?"

"Tony." Clint shrugged, "He told me just to try. Had one of the best reactions to me coming out to him. He just shrugged and carried on."

"I'll have to thank him." Phil declared, "Natasha kept saying she wouldn't interfere. She wouldn't even tell me if you were interested."

"Oh, she knew." Clint laughed slightly, "I think she must have been enjoying the entertainment."

"We'll have to find a cover story." Phil murmured, "Tony will want to meet me. But he might recognise me from the Gala. Although it was just that one time. He might have forgotten my face."

"I doubt it." Clint sighed, "Tony's smarter than he lets on. At least when it comes to remembering names and faces. I've seen him remember every movie attendant's name at a cinema and every waiter in a restaurant. He remembers. He just plays the fool, so that no-one realizes that he does."

"However you must remember it was the Gala at which he had the triggering event for his nervous breakdown. There is a chance he has very little memory of it."

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Clint returned, “However there is a very simple cover story available. We just use your current civilian one. If he does remember, he will assume that it is a cover story that you sold to me. We are down as civilian housemates who met by chance, when we were both in need of accommodation.”

“True.” Phil agreed, “And I am down as a Tax Lawyer, which usually stops any questions into my line of work.”

“I still can’t believe so many people believe that. That they don’t see what a spectacular BAMF you are.”

“It’s my face.” Phil shrugged smiling, “People will believe anything coming out of my mouth because of it. I’m so normal and average to be positively boring.”

“Not to me.” Clint closed for a kiss once more, his lips moving across Phil’s as he repeated, “Not to me.”

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Things started to get more than a bit hectic after that. Clint and Phil spent almost two weeks down in New Mexico watching and trying to sort out the mess left behind when a grounded Asgardian (God) learnt that not everything could be solved by brute force and arrogance.

Then there were the always numerous Hulk sightings. Or rather the Bruce Banner sightings, because Hulk sightings were easy to find. But the Bruce Banner sightings were many and scattered around the world. Clint rather doubted that Banner had managed to be in Tokyo and Paris within one minute of each sighting.

The worst frustration though, was Iron Man. Before the Supervillain had attacked seemingly random factories and businesses about once every two weeks; only disappearing for a month during one quiet phase.

But now the armoured villain was increasing the speed of his attacks. And while before he would often hang around to spar or banter with the Heroes, now he just attacked and fled.

This change in MO was causing the analysts to have aneurisms as they tried to make sense of everything.

Clint didn't have time to deal with Iron Man being a pain. He was too busy trying to keep the wedding as secure as possible. Tony had asked him to check that there would be no way that anyone could get into the party who wasn't invited. Though whether Tony meant the paparazzi or villains or even frenemies, Clint wasn't sure; so he was planning for all three.

Steve had asked for the service to be a small, private gathering. For only those the pair considered to be their family to attend.

Surprisingly (or perhaps not given how Tony was choosing to live out of the limelight) Tony agreed. However in return he had asked that the service be as religion neutral as possible. He didn't mind if a god was invoked. Only that the god not be named.

Tony had also asked for the long version of a particular blessing. Clint had had to look it up. Then had promptly printed it out and folded it inside a book for future keeping.

It read: "Now you will feel no storms, for each of you will be shelter to the other. Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth to the other. Now there is no loneliness, for each of you is companion to the other. You are two persons, but there is one life before you, and one home. Turn together to look at the road you travelled, to reach this; the hour of your happiness. It stretches behind you into the past. Look to the future that lies ahead. A long and winding, adventure-filled road, whose every turn means discovery, new hopes, new joys, new laughter, and a few shared tears. May happiness be your companion, May beauty surround you both in the journey ahead; And through all the years to come. Go this day to your dwelling place and enter into your days together. May your days be good and long upon the earth. Your adventure has just begun!"

Clint was determined that when the time was right he would read those same words to Phil. They were perfect and summed up how he felt every time he looked at Phil.

Steve wanted the wedding to be held within a year of the engagement starting. Preferably within six months. He saw no point in taking his time. He was firmly in love and felt that he always would be.

Tony was not impeding it. However he was more wrapped up in the practical side of things. He was trying to figure out how to organise the wedding so that it wasn't splashed across the front of every newspaper in the US.

Tony wasn't ashamed of being in love with Steve (Clint could tell) he just didn't want to drag Steve into the spotlight, which he believed made the man uncomfortable. Which it did. Just not for the reasons Tony believed.

As the time towards the wedding shortened, things only got more frantic. Iron Man kept shortening the time between his attacks. He was virtually hitting someplace every other day.

"What happens if Iron Man attacks somewhere during the wedding?" Steve asked the rest of the Initiative as they gathered around Phil and Clint's dining table for an unofficial meeting.

"You run out on the wedding and Tony will be devastated." Rhodey remarked, covering his eyes, "Seriously. You have no idea how little sleep he's getting, because he's panicking so badly about this. He constantly thinks you're going to 'Come to your senses' and dump him."

"I find that hard to believe." Natasha retorted, "He is Stark, after all."

"Okay," Rhodey snapped at her, "What is your problem lady? What issue do you have with Tony? Because as long as I've known you you've barely been civil to Tony. And then it's only for Steve's sake. So what I want to know is what exactly did Tones do to you?"

"He did not need to do anything." Natasha replied, "He has money. He has power. He has influence. Anything he desires he can obtain. No matter if it is material or emotional. He can take what he wants. If anyone objects he can pay the authorities to look the other way."

"Tony's not like that." Rhodey protested.

"All people with money are like that." Natasha's voice was cold, "I learnt that as a child in Russia. They did not allow me to be a child because my family had no money. Those with money stole my childhood from me. No one did anything, because they had money and I did not. And that is the way the world works."

"Tony doesn't do things like that." Rhodey sighed, "Look, I'm not saying that some people aren't like that. But Tony is very different. He used to put on one hell of a show. So that everyone was watching him. But then again when people are only watching you for a show, you soon learn to put one on, in case they make a spectacle out of you themselves. Tony's famous. If he doesn't give them a show, they make up one for him. This period of quiet has only worked, because it's so much fun for them to speculate about where he's going

for therapy. About how he's delved into a drug addiction. How he's caught a sexually transmitted disease while trying to use sex to cure his PTSD. How he's injured dozens of therapists who were treating him. There's actually a therapist in Miami right now who is selling her story of how she treated Tony for his PTSD, got seduced by him and is now carrying his child. I'm rather enjoying how that story is panning out. Because I know that Tony hasn't ever even met her. People make stuff up if Tony doesn't give it to them."

"You seem very sure about that." Natasha challenged.

"Look," Rhodey sighed, "Give Tones a chance. He's a great guy. Might even be half way to being a good man. But if you keep your antagonism up towards him, he's never going to let you in to his heart."

"I was under the belief that he didn't have one." Natasha returned.

"Oh, he has one." Rhodey smirked, "Probably the biggest one I've ever seen. But he hides it away. He was taught that having a heart made you weak. That caring was not an advantage. That love was a dangerous disadvantage."

"He will outlive God," Clint grinned, "Trying to have the last word."

"Please," Steve muttered, "Can we stop comparing him to Sherlock? Besides, I believe in Tony Stark. And that's enough for me."

"Love is for children." Natasha protested.

"No," Rhodey smiled, "Falling in love is like jumping off a really tall building. Your brain tells you it is not a good idea, but your heart tells you, you can fly. And somehow… You can. You fly. Your love gives you wings."

"No." Steve shook his head, "It doesn't. My love gives Tony wings. And his love gives me wings. I have given him my heart, Tasha. And he gave me his. You may not approve. You may not like him. But this is the way things are. This is the way things will be. I do not ask for your consent. I simply ask for your acceptance."

"I do not trust him." Natasha breathed, "I have seen too many rich men cause too much harm without thought or care as to the consequences or those they will hurt. However I will keep silent and withhold further judgement until I see his actions for myself. I still dispute that my analysis will be any different than those I have read, produced by SHIELD's psychologists. Nor will it be different from the report that I myself produced not long after my recruitment into SHIELD."

"Over half the reports in that file," Phil murmured, "Are written by new recruits. It's a common initiation task. They write it based on the newspaper articles and personal accounts and media reports. We then let them read the most recent analysis so they can see just how far off the mark they were. So that they know they aren't the best at everything. Every psychologist writes a new report on him every three years as part of their ongoing CPD. It's a thing. And none of them are right. Because Tony puts up a front for everyone to see."

“How can you tell?” Natasha challenged.

“Because if he is everything that the media and the public and the psychologists think he is,” Phil sighed, “He wouldn’t be anywhere near as good an engineer. Nor would he have the devoted loyalty of three people. Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts. Harold ‘Happy’ Hogan. And James ‘Rhodey’ Rhodes. Not one single report has managed to take into account that loyalty. In fact all of them dismiss the relationships as being purely one sided.”

“It still could be.” Natasha pointed out.

“Not on my part.” Rhodey shook his head, “Everything I give Tony he returns ten-fold. Respect is earned. Honesty is appreciated. Trust is gained. Loyalty is returned. That is how Tony and I have lived for many years. He earned my respect. I appreciated his honesty. I gained his trust. And he returned my loyalty. He always made one thing very clear; if my loyalty to him ever cost me my position, he would have a home for me, for the rest of my life. In fact, if anything cost me my position I would have a home. He would make sure of that. Lady, you’ve got to see past his walls and his shields. He’s a very kind soul under all of that bluster and showmanship. I always think it was a shame that he grew up with money. It would have saved him a lot of heartache.”

And that was the end of that. They never answered the question of what would happen if Iron Man attacked on the day of the wedding. Clint thought that it would depend upon the time and place of the attack. Though he crossed his fingers and prayed to a god that he didn’t fully believe in that it wouldn’t happen.

He wasn’t fully sure that Tony’s heart would survive the experience.

Chapter 16: Chapter 15

About a week before the wedding there was pandemonium in the SHIELD office when Agent Barton arrived. He'd been summoned in the middle of the night (Three o'clock to be precise). The only information he had was that it was an emergency and he had to report immediately.

Agent Coulson had also been called in. And as Barton moved towards the main conference room he found himself falling into step with Rogers and Romanov.

"Any ideas?" Barton murmured.

"No." Rogers shook his head, "The message said very little."

"It's certainly worrying people." Romanov remarked, "They are running like headless chickens."

It was a true enough comment. Usually the office was a centre of calm and tranquillity. Even during the most outrageous of Supervillain escapades, nothing touched the order and control of SHIELD. The pandemonium was more equivalent to what might be happening if the office was under attack, yet without the noise of battle.

Barton had to go with might, as the office had yet to actually be under attack. There were drills and orders about what to do, should such a thing happen. But with SHIELD itself remaining largely an unknown organisation no-one had had cause to attack.

Fury was waiting for them in the conference room, along with Hill. Rhodes was settling into a chair as they entered.

"Iron Man has made a move." Fury declared without preamble.

"What has he done now?" Rogers groaned with exasperation.

Despite the lack of casualties and the few injuries that occurred during Iron Man's escapades, with his now almost frantic speed and his cooling off period virtually nothing he had become

the Initiative's most hated enemy. They had no time to recover between attacks. They were starting to consider that Iron Man was not just one man, but several who wore the same suit in order to appear as only one person. No ordinary man could survive on such little sleep as Iron Man had to be getting.

"Where are we going?" Barton asked in resignation.

"Nowhere." Fury countered, "We do not know where he is."

"But you said he attacked." Rhodes frowned.

"No." Romanov shook her head, "He said Iron Man had made a move."

"Correct." Fury nodded, "Dozens of businesses across the United States have been infected by a computer virus. The virus is clearly of the same type and is definitely from Iron Man."

"How can you be sure?" Rhodes queried, "There are lots of computer hackers out there. I should know."

"We know," Hill stated, "Because he signed them. Every computer screen is showing a variation on this."

The projector screen behind Fury changed to show a black screen with red words decorating it. The Iron Man helmet was in the bottom right hand corner as they looked at it.

The words were a simple message. They read:

"I know your secrets, Hammer. Confess. Or I will do it for you. You have forty eight hours."

There was a few moments silence as the group took in the message.

"They all read like this?" Rogers sought confirmation.

"The only difference is the name." Fury nodded.

"Who has been affected?" Barton pressed.

“Many other businesses,” Hill shrugged, “All without a single whisper of anything possibly secret, beyond normal company secrets. The most noticeable one is Stark Industries. Where, curiously, the accusation of secrets is being laid at Stane’s feet, rather than Starks.”

“In most of the cases,” Fury continued, “The accusations are being thrown at the CEOs of the companies. However sometimes the names mentioned are of lower ranked personnel. In every case there is no suspicion of anything that could possibly be construed as illegal. And certainly no common tie between the businesses. This is not a conspiracy accusation. At least not one that has any basis in fact, only fiction.”

“You assume that it is a crime that is being kept secret?” Romanov raised an elegant eyebrow.

“The wording,” Rogers waved a hand at the screen, “You confess a crime. You reveal a secret.”

“Nice of him to give us a deadline.” Rhodes remarked, “When did this first appear?”

“At midnight,” Hill supplied, “New York time. It took a few hours to be reported. Most of the companies thought they could deal with it themselves. However it has appeared on every computer in the company. As well as on the personal computers of the top managers and directors of each of the companies. There are also reports of it appearing on the smartphones and tablets of the directors and top managers. However these are unconfirmed. We are still getting companies coming forward to admit to being infected. Some are even from overseas.”

“This is a huge embarrassment to these companies.” Fury stated, “And it is preventing the companies from working. No matter what is tried the screen does not change. It needs to be stopped. And Iron Man needs to be found. He has to be brought to account for this crime as well as his previous crimes.”

“Why?” Rogers breathed, “He has harmed no-one. He has caused embarrassment, yes. He has prevented businesses from working, but for two days. Declare a holiday. It won’t cause any long term problems. Let him reveal whatever it is he believes he has. If, as you say, there is nothing wrong with these companies, he will be embarrassed. Then he might go away. He is not the threat that Doctor Doom is. He is not the threat that Magneto is. He is not the threat that the Mandarin is. He is not the threat that Doctor Octopus is. He is not the threat that Mystique is. He is not the threat that the Red Skull was. He is barely a blip on the radar. I see no reason to hound him so. Leave him to the lower levels of authority.”

“That is not for you to decide.” Fury snapped, “He is an embarrassment to the government. He is interfering in industry. With the very life blood of this nation. Congress wants him taken down. Immediately! If you have to, you have orders to kill him. It is now Open Season on Iron Man.”

“No.” Rhodes stood up.

“Pardon, War Machine?” Hill stared at the Air Force Lieutenant Colonel.

“No.” Rhodes repeated, “I will not go after Iron Man the way that Congress wants me to. I will not go after him with intent to kill. I will not kill a man who has not killed anyone else. I will not kill a man who has not even halfway harmed anyone else. No one is still suffering physically from injuries he has given them. No one can convince me to kill him.”

“Your Government has given you your orders.” Fury pointed out, “Your Oath of Allegiance binds you to obey them. Your Enlistment Oath demands it of you.”

“My Oath of Allegiance I still obey,” Rhodes countered, “My Enlistment Oath I still observe. However I am expected to question and not carry out unreasonable or immoral acts, if such are ordered. Loyalty to the Country always. Loyalty to the Government when it deserves it. I do not believe that these orders are Constitutional, Moral or Reasonable.”

“Iron Man killed many people in Gulmira.” Hill argued.

“He killed terrorists hounding innocent civilians.” Rogers corrected, “Iron Man has not gone after civilians with the intent to kill. And if he had desired to kill any of us, I am sure he has had an opportunity to do so. I object to these orders and will not carry them out. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to look for Iron Man. And I rather doubt you do either.”

There was silence for a long moment. Barton, despite the shock he was in, could read the truth in Fury’s, for once, unguarded facial expressions. Rogers was correct. They had been called in, but no-one knew where to attack. Or even where to search. And searching the whole of the city of New York would take longer than two days. Never mind the whole of the state or even the country.

Rogers rose to join Rhodes and the two of them started to stride out of the conference room. Barton quickly fell into step behind them. Romanov joining them a moment later.

They moved like an incomplete phalanx through the corridors. Frantic personnel moving out of their way without thinking.

By unspoken agreement, despite the hour, they all made their way to Tony’s place. It was a tired and disgruntled Steve, Clint, Rhodey and Romanov that walked through Tony’s door. They made their way to the den and collapsed on various pieces of furniture and the floor, in an attempt to get some more sleep. By the time they awoke again, Phil had joined them.

Clint would later reflect that it was telling. In their exhaustion they had sought out the one member of their group who knew nothing and then slept together for companionship.

Although Tony was just a civilian, he was so much a part of their group that it was becoming increasingly hard to not consider him part of the Initiative. At some point, no doubt, they would have to confess to him. But it would not be then. They wanted this sanctuary for a little longer. A place untainted by their work.

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When the deadline approached the group was watching a movie on the big screen in the Den. It was a DVD of an old Disney film; Mulan if Clint remembered correctly.

Suddenly the screen changed and an image of Iron Man could be seen, standing confidently and proudly in the centre of the screen.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Iron Man's voice was cold and mechanical, but that was normal, "First allow me to apologise for this intrusion into your normal daily routine. You may or may not be aware that I gave a deadline to various companies and persons in those companies to reveal certain secrets. None of the companies or persons involved in those companies have chosen to take advantage of my offer. No doubt if they had stepped forward the consequences would not be as disastrous as they are now going to be. However I am not the one who will decide what those consequences are.

"Each of the companies I have targeted over my 'Reign of Terror' is corrupt. Whether their crimes are minor or major transgressions is variable. However all of these crimes could have been prevented if people with money and power had not been able to use those influences to persuade those in authority to look the other way. If they had not been able to silence those who wished to stand up and speak about what was happening. Silence was easier than speaking out. It was safer. They were afraid.

"I do not condemn them for their silence. I do not blame them for what happened. I blame the system that would not protect them. I blame those that committed the crimes. I blame those that agreed to look the other way. Who benefited from looking away.

"However those who kept quiet out of fear, I say this to you… People should not be afraid of their governments. Governments should be afraid of their people. Too long has Lady

Justice been kept from weighing those souls that have committed crimes. Too long she has been kept from exacting justice. Lady Justice is blind. She is blind to status. She is blind to money. She is blind to power. She is blind to political influence. It is the duty of the Police to bring perpetrators of crimes to face Lady Justice. It is the duty of Police to investigate crimes. It is the duty of the Public to report crimes. Money and power and influence has interfered with the due process.

"I am here to return things to the way it should be. I have gathered the evidence to prove my allegations. This information is now freely available. I have released it on the internet. It cannot be stopped now. This information is out. You can't stop the signal. Everything goes somewhere.

"However there was one event that triggered this for me. Something I found out about. Something that I tried to get people to acknowledge. Something I tried to get known. But no-one wanted to listen. No-one was willing to listen.

"I did not wish to do this. But this was the only option I felt I had available to me. The footage you are about to see is not suitable for younger or more sensitive viewers. If a film rating was to be applied to this I would say it was only suitable for adult viewers. My apologies go out to one man. He will know who he is.

"I am sorry I did not know sooner. I am sorry that I was not able to help. I am sorry that I did not stop this. I am sorry that you suffered. You did nothing wrong. I have checked everything. You had no knowledge of what was going to happen. And I am sorry for what I am about to do. You do not deserve for this to be seen. However someone else deserves for this to be seen. So that his crimes are known. Once again, I am sorry. I hope that if you are seeing this you can forgive me and that you are with someone who can help you through what is about to be shown.

The screen changed suddenly. The picture was low resolution, nowhere near the quality of what had gone before. However it was of high enough quality for the image to be seen. It was a cave. Large and fairly well lit, although there were some dark patches. The cave had several bulky crates stacked up. And there were several men wandering around.

A man could be seen at a computer. He called out to someone. However the language wasn't English. Clint recognised it. It wasn't a language he knew, but he'd heard it many times

before. It was a Middle Eastern language; however it wasn't one he knew, which meant that it wasn't Farsi, Turkish, Pashto or Uzbek.

Fortunately subtitles were provided.

"Raza, I have established the link."

"Good. Bring him out." A man who had to be the leader, judging by the deference he was given moved forward.

The image changed slightly. A small pop-up box appeared with the face of another man. Clint recognised the man, but he couldn't place him. However Rhodey sucked in a deep breath and immediately moved to Tony's side.

Tony didn't move. He just froze.

Clint had never seen it before, but he was sure that this was what Steve meant when he said that Tony 'went somewhere inside his head'.

Steve moved closer to Tony, pressing up gently next to Tony, opposite to Rhodey. Clint moved to lean against Tony's legs, sensing that the genius needed the support.

He could see Phil out of the corner of his eye and the Handler was flicking his sight between the frozen Tony and the screen.

"Raza," The pop-up box spoke, "Why have you contacted me? The procedure to order more weapons does not involve direct contact with me."

"You paid us to kill a man." Raza declared, "You did not tell us it was Stark, Stane."

Clint sucked in air desperately. Suddenly everything shifted on him. Tony's attack hadn't been random. But more than that he had been betrayed by his friend and colleague.

“Does it matter?” Stane replied, “I paid for his death. I presume you are reporting success. If so you are rather late in doing so. I have been informed about your attack by the Military several days ago.”

“It matters,” Raza replied, “Because we do not believe in killing the golden goose.”

There were sounds of a fight in the background, the camera was moved to face a new scene. It was a new angle of the same cave. A man was struggling, desperately fighting two men, who were firmly holding his upper arms. But he couldn’t fight properly; he was clutching something in his arms.

However that wasn’t stopping him from throwing his weight around. He was kicking out and head-butting as much as possible.

The camera zoomed in. Clint flinched as he saw the hole in Tony’s chest. He had only ever thought that the Arc Reactor was on the surface. That it didn’t go all that deep into Tony’s chest. But the image corrected that belief.

Clint swore that he could see Tony’s lungs and heart.

Tony’s forward motion was stopped, just behind a barrel. Clint could just make out that it was open, but filled with something.

“I paid you to kill him.” Stane protested.

Suddenly, without warning, Tony was pitched forward; his head being forced into the barrel.

Clint tensed as he saw liquid slopping out of the barrel as Tony entered. For a long few moments Tony kept still. But he couldn’t withstand forever. He lashed out as best he could, desperately struggling. Waterboarding, a difficult torture to endure, even for a trained soldier. For an untrained civilian it had to have been terrifying.

After several long, heart-stopping moments Tony was pulled out the water. He was clearly gasping for breath.

However he had only seconds to catch his breath, before he was forced down again.

Clint found himself holding his breath along with Tony. Trying to support the man, even though he knew that this happened long ago and nothing he did could change it. It was one thing to believe that a man had been tortured. It was another to see the evidence of it. It was yet another to actually see the torture before your very eyes and yet be powerless to change anything.

Again and again Tony was pulled out and plunged back into the water. Until he was a quivering and shaking mess of a man. A mere shell of what he had been. A mere shadow of the man that Clint knew.

"You want him dead." Raza declared firmly, "Then give us a Jericho missile."

"If you want a Jericho missile," Stane's voice was even, "Then you will have to pay for one."

"I will have Jericho missile one way or the other," Raza countered, "And I will not have to pay."

"How will you get one?" Stane sounded amused, "I have the only supply."

"You have the factories," Raza pointed out, "But I have the inventor."

"Your equipment is rudimentary," Stane pointed out, "You have a box of scraps for him to use. What you demand of him is impossible."

"You should have more faith in your golden goose." Raza smiled coldly, "I firmly believe he will succeed. But then again, if you had more faith in him, you wouldn't have paid for his death. Do not worry, when he is of no more use to me, I will kill him."

"You will not find him an easy man to tame." Stane remarked, "And I believe that he will not succeed. But amuse yourself with your attempts if you so desire. As long as he is gone and will not return, what happens to him does not matter to me. I have what I want. The Company is mine. I will no longer have to go behind his back to make a better profit."

“To think that the Media gave Stark the title of Merchant of Death,” Raza smirked, “When the true Merchant of Death is yourself.”

“Too long have I been the Puppet Master. Now I come out from behind the curtain.” Stane replied, “I believe this conversation has no further purpose for either of us. Goodbye Raza. I expect I will hear from you again soon.”

The screen went blank for a moment, before returning to Iron Man.

“Mister Stark, once again I apologise for my actions. To the world, I will not apologise for my actions. Sometimes bad guys are the only good guys you get. Do not let this lesson be forgot.”

“You said you trust Ping! Why is Mulan any different?” The sudden jerk back to Mulan startled the group.

Chapter 17: Chapter 16

Yet Tony did not move. He seemed frozen in the moment. His eyes still staring blankly ahead.

"Tony?" Steve spoke softly, moving his arm to lie across the back of Tony's shoulders, "Tony? Can you hear me?"

Clint had moved so that he was kneeling at Tony's feet. Automatically putting himself in a vulnerable position, in order to make Tony feel safer.

"Please Tones," Rhodey tried, "Please come back to us."

"Tony?" Clint called out gently, "You're in your penthouse. I'm here. So is Steve. And Rhodey. And Phil. And Tasha. We're all here. You're safe. You're safe with us. I promise. You're safe. Listen to my voice. You know it is true. Come on back. You're not there anymore. You're not there anymore."

Tony twitched. Then he pulled his arms up to cross protectively over his chest; over the Arc Reactor. His legs pulled up formed an additional protective barrier to them.

"I… I thought…" Tony tried to make a sentence, "I thought it… I thought it was a nightmare. I remember hearing his voice, but I thought it had to be a hallucination. I kept on dreaming you were there, Rhodey. That you had found me. That you saved me. Or I dreamed it was Pepper waking me up and I was back in Malibu. That I had never left. That I was safe in my own bed.

"But even so, when I came back, I couldn't help but flinch inside whenever I heard his voice. I told myself that it was just my imagination. That it was just my fears getting the better of me. That it was PTSD. But I couldn't listen to his voice anymore. I couldn't live with the fear. I had to get away. I had to get away from him. So I ran. And I ran. And I ran. I told myself that it was silly. I told myself that it was stupid. But every time I heard his voice I was back in that cave again. I was powerless. I was helpless."

“No.” Steve shook his head, “You were not. You fought back. You beat them. They had all the advantages. They had all the power. And you still beat them. You won.”

“God, Tones.” Rhodey breathed, “I had no idea. If I had… If I had… I’d have beaten him to death. I swear. I’m yours. Your shield. Your sword. Whatever you need. Your brother in all but blood.”

“What do you want us to do?” Clint asked from his position on the floor, “Say the word and he’s dead.”

Clint knew that he was showing more of Hawkeye to Tony than he ever meant to. But this was a man who had deliberately hurt Tony. Who had set him up to die. Who had paid to have him killed. Who had watched him be tortured without remorse or regret or even compassion. Clint would lose no sleep over Stane’s death. Natasha wouldn’t even bat an eyelid.

“I want…” Tony whispered, “I want for it to never have happened. But that will never be so. So for now I want to sleep and think on it again in the morning. Let the authorities deal with Stane for now. Let me piece myself back together. I refuse to be shattered pieces on the floor when they come to interrogate me.”

“Interview.” Phil corrected.

“It will be an interrogation.” Tony replied softly, “It always is. It always is for me.”

“Not this time.” Phil reassured, “Get some sleep.”

“Jarvis,” Tony closed his eyes, “Bed.”

“Very good, Sir.” Jarvis spoke up, making everyone apart from Tony, Steve and Rhodey jump, “Mister Barton, if you could please move backwards.”

Clint rose gently and gracefully, stepping backwards. Then, much to his surprise the couch started to push forward a hidden section. The section then clicked upwards to extend the cushioned section of the couch outwards. Then a second section was pushed forward, once again clicking upwards and into place.

Considering that the couch originally had been large enough for Steve to lie full length on it, with enough space left over for Clint’s torso, the additional section turned the whole thing into a rather large bed.

The group settled down for a night's rest. No-one was going to leave Tony on his own.

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When Clint woke up the next morning it was about nine. He looked around the room. Tony was curled up on the sofa turned bed. Steve spooned up behind him. A large quilted blanket was draped over the two of them. Steve's back was facing the back of the sofa, however it was clear that if he felt there was a threat to Tony he could quickly twist and move the genius into the more protected position.

Rhodey lay near Tony. His back was to his old friend, but with a bit of distance between them. Much like two children sharing a bed at night. However Rhodey's posture screamed that he could rise immediately to his feet should the need arise; another line of defence for Tony.

Phil was sleeping in a reclining chair, situated between the sofa and the window. He looked to be deeply asleep and as if a bomb going off nearby would be insufficient to disturb him. However Clint knew that it was only an illusion. The Handler could rise from sleep at a moment's notice to fully awake and fire a bullet at whatever threat had awoken him. The only reason Clint's movements hadn't woken him was that he was accustomed to the noises that Clint made as he moved.

Natasha had taken a reclining chair between the sofa and the door. She was curled up like a cat. Like Phil, she appeared to be completely dead to the world, and yet was a finely coiled spring. However she wasn't asleep. Clint could tell by the set of her shoulders. It was something small, but he'd worked too many missions with her to miss that tiny sign. She was awake and was on guard. No doubt she'd traded with Phil at some point in the night.

It was their usual procedure. Those who would be the key assets during the day were allowed to sleep through the night without a watch shift. Meanwhile the others would trade shifts in order that all were sufficiently rested. As Tony's lover Steve was automatically one of the key assets in this case. And Clint, as Tony's friend, was the other.

Clint stretched gently as he moved. His position would have been slightly embarrassing if it wasn't for the fact that he knew nobody would tease anybody about anything that had

happened last night. He had slept curled up at the foot of the bed, just beyond foot reach of the other three men on the sofa. It was as if he had been their dog.

With barely a sound, Clint vacated the bed. Rolling his shoulders to work out any kinks that had built up, due to his position, overnight he made his way to the kitchen.

He managed to press the correct buttons on the ridiculously complicated coffee machine so that it produced a good, proper mug of black coffee. Which he then proceeded to gleefully adulterate with enough sugar to make a dentist cry.

The essential dealt with, Clint went hunting for breakfast foods. He easily found the fixings for his breakfast buttie, which didn't take long to start cooking.

"Jarvis," Clint cocked his head to look vaguely upwards, "Could you bring up any articles currently running about what happened last night? In particular ones featuring Stane, Stark Industries or Tony."

"Of course, Mister Barton," Jarvis replied calmly, "Where would you care to view them? I presume that the den is not a preferred location at this time."

"Right," Clint nodded, "Put them up in here. But cut them if Tony comes in. Also, no audio. If any video, could you put basic subtitles up? And keep them up for longer than normal? I'm a slow reader."

"As you wish, Mister Barton." Jarvis declared, "On your left."

"Could you please call me Clint?" Clint almost begged, "Barton isn't what I prefer to be called."

"If that is what you so desire, Mister Clint." Jarvis stated.

"That's the best I'm going to get, isn't it?" Clint sighed, "And haven't we had this conversation before?"

"Indeed, Mister Clint." Jarvis confirmed.

Clint flitted his eyes over the various articles and broadcasts about Iron Man's revelations. There was general outcry at the fact that the revealed crimes had gone unnoticed, or more precisely unreported, for so long. Stane had already been arrested; although he had tried to make a run for it, and had been caught at the airport.

Apparently the pilot of his private jet had had an attack of conscience and turned the man in.

The stock price of all businesses that had appeared in Iron Man's little black book, as Clint was starting to think of it, were taking a massive hit on the market. However that wasn't anything Clint was too worried about.

There was a fair amount of sympathy towards Tony and remarks that he had to be a strong man to endure what he had without completely shattering. The renewed claims that his PTSD was an issue weren't surprising. To be honest Clint was wondering himself just how far back the footage had set Tony's recovery. Several experts had come forward to explain just how Tony could have heard all that had happened in the footage and yet not stepped forward to accuse Stane himself. "Repressed memories" was a phrase that was being thrown around a great deal.

There were also murmurings that wondered if Tony was still alive. Whether Stane had tried a second time to kill the genius and this time had succeeded.

Overall Tony was coming out of the whole situation with, if not a glowing report, at least no condemnation. There were a few people saying that Tony should have seen all the signs that Stane was betraying him. However they were being drowned out by those that remembered Stane had been Howard's right hand man. No wonder Tony had trusted Stane. Stane had been there for most of his life. His father's best friend and confidant after Peggy Carter. Tony had literally grown up with the man as a surrogate uncle. No accusation of misconduct had ever reached Tony's ears. And it seemed Stane had worked hard to make sure that it had stayed that way. Keeping Tony insulated in his own little world.

More and more people were coming forward with information, not just about Stane's crimes, but about all of the crimes Iron Man had exposed. What they had to say was damning. People paid off. People intimidated into silence. People imprisoned despite being innocent. People killed.

Clint was starting to get a new view of Iron Man. Criminal he may be, but he clearly had an agenda. One which did not seem to benefit him at all.

The Media were starting to hail him as a hero. As a vigilante. Senators and Congressmen that Clint knew had been amongst the loudest to shout for Iron Man's capture and imprisonment or even death were now some of his loudest supporters. How did the old saying go: "A week is a long time in politics"? Well that had been decades ago. Now a day was a long time in the Media.

There was speculation about who Iron Man was. The Media circling like sharks around the few clues that Iron Man had given.

Some believed that Iron Man was one of the terrorists who had had a change of heart. That he had been unable to take watching Tony be tortured day after day for failing to build something that was not possible given the equipment he had. The terrorist had finally snapped and killed everyone, setting Tony free to walk to his freedom; before becoming Tony's avenging angel.

Some suggested that Iron Man was one of the soldiers involved in the convoy that had been attacked. Either a survivor or one who had been presumed dead. That they had investigated who had leaked the information about what was going on and who was there. Once they had found enough information to suspect, they had then taken up the role of Deep Throat in the business world's Watergate.

There were even some suggestions that Rhodey was Iron Man. They pointed to his long friendship with Tony. The fact that it was well known that Tony had refused to talk to anyone about what had happened, and yet spent a good few hours in Rhodey's company, but no-one else's. Rhodey was also known to have been to MIT and so could be expected to have the engineering skills required to build a suit of weaponized armour. It was also pointed out that he was incredibly loyal to Tony, sticking by him when many others would have walked away. So the idea of Rhodey being Tony's Guardian Angel was not outside the realm of possibility for some.

When Clint felt that he had enough of an idea of the storm that was coming he waved his hand through the projection, in order to cancel it.

"Jarvis," Clint readdressed the ceiling, "What is Tony's favourite food?"

"Sir enjoys pizza, Chinese take-away and many other such foods." Jarvis replied, "However, Mister Clint, if you are inquiring as to Sir's preferred comfort food, he has always

enjoyed blueberries. For breakfast he loves pancakes and muffins."

"Let's see if I can spoil him a little." Clint rolled up his sleeves and set to work.

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About half an hour later, Rhodey wandered into the kitchen.

"Something smells good." He remarked.

"Jarvis confessed that Tony likes blueberries." Clint shrugged, "So I've made some blueberry muffins. I think he could use the comfort after last night."

"Likes? No." Rhodey shook his head, "He loves the things. Look, I'll make his comfort smoothie, you keep going on the baking. If he's having a bad day… He won't eat a meal. But snacks and smoothies. I remember one particularly bad week at MIT when he lived off blueberries and smoothies. He did the same for a fortnight after the car crash."

"Car crash?" Clint raised an eyebrow.

"Killed his parents and Jarvis." Rhodey explained.

"Jarvis?" Clint was surprised now.

"The original." Rhodey waved his hand, "He was the butler. Don't believe anything Tony says about 'Just A Really Very Intelligent System'. He was named for the person who was more of a father to Tony than anyone else… All of his bots are named for people. If you understand his way of thinking. Apart from Dum-E."

"Right." Clint logged the information in his mind for perusal later.

"You bothered looking at the news?" Rhodey asked as he sank down into a stool at the kitchen's island.

"Stane's been arrested." Clint summarized, "Tony seems to be coming out of this alright. Though there is speculation that you are Iron Man."

"As much as I wish I was," Rhodey snorted, "Because then I would have just killed Stane. No-one hurts Tony like that. Not on my watch."

"Not on mine either." Clint agreed, "What time do you think he'll wake up?"

"Depends." Rhodey shrugged, "If his brain's crashed, it could be about ten tonight. If he's just rebooting not long."

“He’s not a computer.” Clint challenged.

“No,” Rhodey agreed, “But he’s always described his brain like that. He either crashes or reboots. And rebooting is like sleeping, only different. His brain works at a thousand miles an hour. He can’t just turn it off. I’ve seen him try before. It can sometimes take alcohol, exhaustive exercise or extreme emotion to get him to reboot, if he’s on a particularly strong train of thought. Crashing is more common, because he doesn’t stop working until he physically cannot continue anymore. Rebooting is preferable, it can happen every day under the right conditions. It’s like putting a computer into hibernate. Speaking of… Jarvis, what is my voicemail box like?”

“Your voicemail box is almost full, Master Rhodey,” Jarvis replied evenly, “May I have your permission to delete some of the older messages in order to reserve space for more recent messages?”

“Catalogue any messages received since Iron Man’s broadcast went out last night, Jarvis.” Rhodey instructed, “Of those which ones would you deem important?”

“Approximately ten, Master Rhodey.” Jarvis stated, “Of those, three are from your Commanding Officer and his immediate superiors demanding you respond to their call and return from leave immediately to deal with the allegations that you are Iron Man.”

“Oh, curse the Gods of War and Pride!” Rhodey muttered.

“Three are from Stark Industries,” Jarvis continued, “To be precise the Board of Directors, who want to know if you know how to contact Sir.”

“Rats on a sinking ship.” Rhodey put in.

“Three are from Nicholas Fury,” Jarvis ignored the interruption, “He wishes to instruct you on what the pitch to the Media will be. In particular regarding your relationship with his organisation.”

“That’ll be fun.” Rhodey murmured.

“Lastly,” Jarvis carried on, “Miss Potts would like you to contact her at your next available opportunity. She would like to liaise with you regarding a possible joint Press Release. If such a thing is not possible, she would like to check her pitch against yours so that we may, and I quote, “Check that we are all singing off the same hymn sheet”. Would you like me to return any of those calls, Master Rhodey?”

“Let me have some coffee and breakfast first, Jarvis.” Rhodey groaned, “Although send a message to Pepper. Tell her I’ll check with my bosses before I can check my story against hers. And tell her to be strong. Not that she wouldn’t be anyway.”

“Very good, Master Rhodey,” Jarvis replied, “Anything else?”

“Not for now, Jarvis.” Rhodey finished.

“Is he listening all the time?” Clint was startled and slightly worried about the potential security risks.

“No,” Rhodey shook his head, “He’s in idle mode until he hears his name and a command. Everything in the Penthouse runs on a watch and dump system. Jarvis sees. Then he deletes. Unless there’s a security breach or something changes dramatically. Say, someone managed to teleport in. Their sudden presence would be noted and recorded for future reference. And, if necessary, the Police contacted.”

“But he hacks your phone account?” Clint pressed.

“Not unless I ask him to.” Rhodey grinned, “And even then, Jarvis doesn’t inquire further than what I request. He probably played through all the messages and figured out which ones were important and deleted his knowledge of the rest.”

“How did he know which ones were the important ones though?” Clint asked, “Did you tell him?”

“No need.” Rhodey shrugged, “Tony has a habit of putting a little too much I in his AIs.”

“What?” Clint frowned confused.

“He makes them too intelligent by most people’s standards,” Rhodey explained, “Have you ever heard of the Turing Test?”

“Heard the name,” Clint agreed, “Don’t know what it is.”

“It’s a very simple test,” Rhodey smiled, “A person talks to someone. Someone they can’t see. They can talk to them through a computer or with their voice, depending on the test requirements, but it’s usually only typed interface that’s used. Then the person is asked if they talked with a computer or a person. A computer passes the test if they cannot be distinguished from a person. Jarvis could pass that test easily. Tony just hasn’t made him public.”

“Why not?”

“People get scared when there’s things they don’t understand around. Add in all the stories of evil AIs that Hollywood got hold of…” Rhodey sighed, “Jarvis is safer like this. And Tony’s safer too. Because Jarvis is fiercely protective of Tony. And no-one is trying to muzzle Jarvis.”

“Alright.” Clint breathed, “I don’t fully understand. And I don’t fully get it. And I’m sure there’s more you’ve not told me. But I’ll trust you. I’ll trust Jarvis. And I’ll trust Tony.”

Rhodey smiled, even as he picked up his mug of coffee.

“I’ll have my breakfast,” Rhodey declared, “Then I’ll wake Tones and say goodbye to him. After last night, if I just leave he’ll take it badly. But if I ignore my CO for much longer after that he’ll Court Marshal me.”

Clint merely shrugged in reply, moving to check on the rest of what he was cooking.

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Clint entered the den just after Rhodey left the Penthouse, carrying a tray of food, complete with Tony’s usual coffee.

The genius was still bleary eyed and was wrapped up in the quilt on the sofa. However he reached out unerringly for the coffee mug. After a few sips he was more awake and able to take in the tray that Clint had managed to place on the sofa without spilling.

“Are those Blueberry Brioche?” He breathed in wonder.

“Yep.” Clint grinned, “And Blueberry Muffins. And Blueberry Pancakes.”

“You,” Tony pointed at the archer with one of the brioches, “Are a God. I don’t care what anyone else says about you.”

“Thank you.” Clint smiled, glad to see a bit of the usual Tony attitude back. At least the episode last night didn’t seem to have set his recovery back by very much.

“Sir,” Jarvis spoke up, “Miss Potts asked that you contact her as soon as you were coherent. Should I connect you?”

“Go ahead Jarvis.” Tony instructed, “Up on the screen.”

“Tony!” Steve squawked, “You do not appear like this to a woman!”

“Hate to burst your bubble honey,” Tony smirked, “But Tasha’s a woman. And Pepper’s seen a lot worse on my part. She won’t bat an eyelid.”

And indeed she didn’t. When the strawberry-blonde appeared on the screen, she merely raised an eyebrow at the scene.

“Hey Pep.” Tony saluted her with his coffee mug, “What’s the what?”

“The Board of Directors would like to speak to you, Tony,” Pepper declared calmly, “Regarding you taking over the role of CEO once again. As I was formerly your PA they believed that I still had the ability to contact you.”

“Of course,” Tony agreed, “Wouldn’t want to leave you out of the Three Musketeers.”

“You never were one for the Musketeers,” Pepper countered, “However considering that I got an invitation to your wedding; I shall take that as a compliment. How do you want to handle this? I am currently fending them off, but between them and the Media I am having a hard time. Once the stockholders get involved then there will be trouble. SI is bleeding points on the Stock Market.”

“What about the Injunction?” Tony pressed.

“Cancelled,” Pepper returned, “They dealt with that within an hour of Stane getting arrested.”

“Understood,” Tony nodded, “I’ll get back to you in an hour with my decision. This isn’t something to take lightly.”

“You’ve changed,” Pepper remarked softly, “And for the better I think. An hour and I will be contacting you. Will that be all, Mister Stark?”

“Yes, that will be all, Miss Potts.” Tony ended the conversation.

Clint had a new respect for Pepper Potts. She clearly did not take prisoners and had no reservations about talking to Tony no matter what state of undress he appeared to be in. Because all wrapped up in that blanket, he certainly looked as if he could be naked underneath.

“Steve,” Tony turned to face his fiancée, “This is where you have to make a decision.”

“Me?” Steve blinked in surprise, “This is all about you. Your choice.”

“No,” Tony shook his head, “It’s yours. The way I see it, you have three options. Option One: you walk away. You signed up to marry Tony. Not Stark. And I will hold no blame or recrimination towards you if you decide that you cannot deal with Stark and choose to walk away. Option Two: you tell me to reject SI. I can assign someone to be CEO. Things will continue as they have always done for us. I will be Tony forever. Option Three: you marry Stark. And you prepare to have your entire life from birth to now to death examined under a microscope by the Media and anybody looking for a good story. You put up questions and insults and jibes and everything. You deal with the fact that I will drink and drink and drink. That I will spend days in my labs not coming up for air. That I am narcissistic. That I

am arrogant. That I am disrespectful. That I am thoughtless. Those are your three options. What happens from this point forward is your choice. And I will not blame you if you choose to walk away. If I were in your shoes, I would."

"No," Steve smiled gently as he caught Tony's wrists, "You wouldn't. And I choose Option Four."

"There isn't an Option Four." Tony frowned.

"Yes," Steve grinned, "There is. I marry Tony. And we change the world's perception of Stark. After all, you've been through a traumatic experience. You've undergone therapy for PTSD. You've fallen in love. You're going to get married. All of that changes a person. So who Stark was, isn't who you have to be. We can make a new you for the Media. A new you for the World. Leave behind who you were."

"You can't just do that." Tony protested, "It doesn't work that way."

"Why not?" Steve asked, "I love you. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. I love you. All of you. Every little bit. And I will take the good with the bad. Because there will be far more good in our lives than bad. And I know that because there has been far more good in our lives than bad ever since we met. I have wanted to know more about you ever since I saw you sitting on a bench in Central Park. I spent days wandering around it, just looking for you. Because I loved the way you looked. And then when I saw you smile, it was brighter than anything I'd ever seen before. And then when you smiled at me, because of me, for me… I wondered how I'd thought your smile was bright before. Because then it was like the sun. I take you. All of you. For now and for always. Let the Media try and muckrake. I don't care. As long as I have you… I have the World at my feet."

"You're a sap." Tony breathed.

"Your sap." Steve agreed, "Finish your breakfast and then call Pepper back. I presume there's some legal hoops to jump through?"

"More than a few." Tony sighed, "You're sure about this?"

"More sure than I have been about anything," Steve declared, "Except when I asked you to marry me."

"What did I do to deserve someone like you?" Tony asked.

"Be yourself." Steve smiled, "That's all you'll ever need to be for me."

Clint felt uncomfortably like a voyeur, which was strange because he'd watched worse than this in his career, and never felt like that. Perhaps it was because he knew and cared for both Tony and Steve.

In attempt to cover up his embarrassment he grabbed one of the muffins to eat. It seemed Phil was having a similar experience as he left the room to quietly use the toilet. Tasha just raised an eyebrow as she watched the scene.

"I love you." Tony murmured.

"I know." Steve kissed Tony's forehead, "And I know you are going to do the best you can for SI. I know you will do the right thing. And we will face the Media, together."

"Not at first." Tony replied softly, "I want the wedding over and done with before they figure it out. I don't want them making a spectacle out of a private event."

"Of course." Steve agreed, "Eat up. You're going to need your strength."

Chapter 18: Chapter 17

When Pepper called back, Tony had managed to eat enough food for Clint to be satisfied that Tony had had a decent breakfast. Although Steve was trying to ply him with more food.

"Mister Stark?" She called softly, "What is your decision?"

"I want what I asked for after you told me that you hate job hunting." Tony spoke cryptically.

"A cheeseburger?" She teased lightly, "For breakfast?"

"Stuff the cheeseburger," Tony retorted, "I just had homemade blueberry brioche. I didn't even know you could do that!"

"For a genius there are a lot of things you don't know." Pepper smiled, "Have you yet memorised your Social Security Number?"

"Five…" Tony tailed off.

"Eight more numbers to go." Pepper smirked, "What time do you want me to have everything ready for? And where? Also what should I tell them?"

"Malibu," Tony stated firmly, "It will be regarding the recent revelations, of course, and announcing the future of Stark Industries."

"Any sneak-peaks?" Pepper pressed.

"No." Tony was blunt, "I'll have Happy contact you with the time… Just, could you make sure that… Christine Everhart… She is not to be there… She… I can't…"

"I understand." Pepper was gentle, "Will that be all Mister Stark?"

"Yes, that will be all, Miss Potts." Tony motioned and Jarvis cut the call.

"Jarvis," Tony addressed his AI, "Call Happy."

"Calling Master Hogan." Jarvis declared, "Call connected."

"What do you want, boss?" Happy didn't bother with preliminaries.

"I need to get to SI Malibu," Tony stated, "As quickly as possible. But I don't want anyone to know where I came from."

“Of course, boss.” Happy nodded calmly, “I’ll have your limo ready in an hour. I’ll organise the flight. I’ll make the arrangements so that no one can find out where we came from.”

“Liaise with Pepper,” Tony instructed, “So that she knows when we’re arriving. I don’t want to spend any longer in Malibu than necessary.”

“Understood boss.” Happy nodded, “Time to get your game face on, sir.”

Tony cut the connection. Then he rose from the sofa.

“He’s right.” Tony remarked, “I’ve got an hour to get myself ready.”

Stretching himself out, Tony wandered out of the room. Clint picked up the various breakfast implements and returned to the kitchen to wash up.

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With ten minutes to go, before Happy had stated, Tony emerged out of the bedroom. He was adjusting his tie. His perfectly pressed suit was being worn as if it were a suit of armour. The suit was designer, but fairly restrained. It fitted precisely and completed the image of Stark.

Even when Tony had been to see Fury he hadn’t worn a suit. He’d dressed smartly, but not completely formally. This was formal and business orientated.

“You sure you don’t want me to come?” Steve asked again.

“Positive.” Tony declared, “This has to be my show. They aren’t finding out about you until the wedding is over. You’ll be with me in spirit. That’s all that I need.”

The kiss that concluded that statement was pretty restrained by Clint’s standards. Hell, his first kiss with Phil had been more hungry and needy and desperate and passionate.

However the light blush that dusted Tony's cheeks was enough to tell Clint that it was all that was needed at that moment.

"Come back safe." Steve instructed.

"As you wish." Tony replied gently.

With one backwards glance, Tony left the Penthouse.

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Clint wanted to talk to Phil about what had been revealed. To find out what SHIELD had known. And not just the lies that Fury told so well that they were indistinguishable from the truth.

But he would not compromise security. As long as they were in Tony's Penthouse, such things could not be discussed. It did not matter that the Master of the House was not present. His AI Butler was and Clint didn't trust Jarvis not to record and remember something, if he felt it would negatively affect Tony.

The Archer trusted Jarvis to protect Tony. Therefore he couldn't trust Jarvis to keep his secrets.

After all they, as a group, were deceiving Tony. It wasn't malicious. And it was in his best interests. But it didn't stop Clint from feeling guilty about it from time to time. However he had no desire to bring Tony into their way of life. There was no need to further damage the already wounded man.

No, best that Tony was kept safe and protected from the violence out there in the world. Clint didn't believe that they would have any arguments amongst themselves regarding that. Nor would Tony object to their protection (even if he didn't know how far it would extend), no doubt Tony would be grateful that they would prevent him from ending up in a situation similar to Afghanistan again.

While they knew it would take Tony nearly six hours to reach Malibu, none of them wanted to leave the Penthouse to go home. They were going to wait together to watch Tony's press conference, because a press conference it had to be if he didn't want Everhart there.

Much to their surprise the news channel switched to show a SI podium within four hours. Pepper could be seen standing behind the podium, clearly laying out the rules.

"Mister Stark will be making a statement about recent events," She declared, "He may or may not take questions at the end, depending on how he feels. Any interruptions will be dealt with by ejection from this conference. No exceptions."

About twenty seconds after that Tony walked out to the podium.

"It's been a good while since I was in front of you," Tony declared, "So I figure I'll stick to the cards this time. That's if I can read my handwriting.

"I'm sure the entire world has, by now, seen the broadcast that Iron Man made last night. So I will confirm that yes that was me in the video. No, I was not aware that my captivity and attempted murder were organised by one of my father's oldest friends. No, I was not aware that SI products were being sold to terrorists and Nations enemy to this Nation until it was painfully rubbed in my face.

"That is not what this company believes in. My father did not set up this company to supply weapons to bigots. He did not believe in selling weapons to criminals. He did not believe in providing weapons to genocidal lunatics. My father stood against them. He was a Patriot and a believer in freedom and equality. He believed in making sure that our brave men and women out on the front lines were equipped with the best weapons possible. The most advanced weapons possible.

"He did not believe in making sword for our soldiers and then selling them to be used against our soldiers. I believe that right now he is spinning in his grave in fury at what has happened to this company.

“To this end, Stark Industries will be shutting down its Weapons Department immediately. I know I have said this before. But last time Stane stepped in and prevented my decision from going through. That being said, SI will continue to support our military forces.

“One of the stories my father used to tell me as I was growing up was about Captain America. It was about how Captain America got his shield. My father was so proud of that shield. That it was used to protect Captain America as he went about protecting the Allies and rescuing people from the Axis.

“Think about it. My father made a shield. Not a weapon. A shield. It wasn’t to be used to attack. But to defend. That is what Captain America does. He protects. He does not attack. He does not invade. He does not destroy. He protects. He shields. He stands as our last line of defence. Watch him in action. The man is a Paladin.

“That is where Stark Industries will take its inspiration from now on. Our Weapons Department will be transformed into our Defence Department. Our focus for the department will be on protecting our soldiers out in the field and at home. Better armour so that they can survive the combat unharmed. Better communication equipment so that they can call for help should they need to. Better transport so that help can get to them quicker. Better medical equipment so that they can recover from what injuries they do receive. And should the worst come to the worst and they are irrevocably injured, better support for them to leave full and healthy and as normal as possible lives. Prosthetics that do not cost the earth. Living aids to allow them to live, rather than simply survive and endure.

“For those of you who think we cannot do this, I say we can. For those of you who say that all I know is how to destroy, I defy you. I built my first circuit board as a child. My first engine before I hit double figures. I created. That is and always has been my first love. To create. Not to destroy. It was the direction of the company and the persuasion of those whom I believed knew better that caused me to turn aside from what I enjoyed towards destruction and damage and death. I should not have allowed myself to be so easily swayed.

“The crimes committed against this company by those who were trusted to lead it will not destroy us. We will rise from the ashes. We will defend and protect our men and women who risk their lives every day to protect this great Nation.

“However crimes they still were. In order to show that Stark Industries has nothing to hide, we will be opening all our financial files to a team of FBI accountants. I want them to

go through it bit by bit, bill by bill, file by file to locate and destroy any and all corruption. Should they need to investigate further any file they request will be made available to them, except for the design specs of our products. We can't give away those secrets.

"In addition, I will opening my own financial files, of the last seven years, to the IRS. To ensure that I am free from any taint that Stane has managed to spread over everything he touched.

"It is my intent that he and any co-conspirators are prosecuted to the full extent of the law. No matter how long that takes. This company does not support terrorist activities. This company does not appreciate being made a fool of. This company does not stand by when treason is discovered. The situation should never have gotten to that position in the first place! Our internal checks and balances will be overhauled to prevent anything like this from happening again.

"I will be returning to run this company. However I have to tie up some things from where I have been living since I walked away to recover. Once that has happened, which shouldn't take more than a few weeks, I will return permanently to my position as CEO."

Tony leaned slightly forward on the podium.

"I will take a few questions." Tony appeared to suddenly decide.

Instantly every hand in the audience went up. Seemingly at random, Tony picked one.

"Do you honestly believe that you can change the direction of Stark Industries so quickly?"

"Yes." Tony nodded, "I haven't been just focussing on my recovery since I vanished. I have always found some of my greatest comfort and peace in the act of creation. I have several new designs, focused in the areas I have mentioned, ready and waiting to go to production."

He turned and pointed at another.

“Where have you been all this time?”

“Private.” Tony retorted and picked a new hand, before any objection could be voiced.

“What do you say to the allegations that you got your therapist pregnant?”

“I rather doubt that’s possible.” Tony shrugged, “Seeing as how my therapist is male. Also the current accusations are going to be met by the usual row of Stark Industry lawyers. I haven’t been careless before. I’m not going to start now.”

“How do you feel about having your torture broadcast to the whole world?”

“That’s a pretty silly question,” Tony sighed, “How do you think I feel? How would you feel? I feel violated. I feel angry. I feel hurt. I feel shame. That was the worst three months of my life. And now everyone knows what they did to me. It actually feels worse than I thought it would. But it also feels liberating. Because now I don’t have to keep quiet about it.”

“Have you ever had any contact with Iron Man?”

“I have never met Iron Man. I have never been told his name.” Tony denied, “The first time he ever spoke to me was last night in the broadcast everyone saw. I do not approve of how he has achieved his goals. But I will not argue with his results. More people are listening than they would otherwise be. Sometimes in order to do the right thing, you have to do the wrong thing. I do not believe that it should be the case in a fair and just world. But this isn’t a fair and just world. I wish it was. I wish that Iron Man had found a better way to do what he did. But clearly he believed he had no other option. No more questions.”

Tony strode off the stage.

Chapter 19: Chapter 18

Back in DC there was slightly awed silence for a moment.

"How much of that was put on?" Clint breathed, "Because damn if Tony didn't look strong as steel just then."

"Titanium," Steve countered, "He must have been pulling himself together and prepping for that the entire flight."

"Sometimes," Phil smirked slightly, "The suit makes the man. I have to go. Clint, you coming?"

Clint rose to his feet. He wanted to talk it over with Phil and they could only do that when they were safe in their own territory. Tasha followed them, but was only vacating the penthouse. She left to go to her own home without much preamble.

"They fucking *water-boarded* him, Phil!" Clint snapped the moment their front door was shut behind them.

"I know." Phil sounded guilty and remorseful.

"And if that was their *opening*," Clint continued, "Then you can *bet* they didn't go any easier on him after that."

"I know." Phil agreed, "It certainly explains why he was so keen to brush me off when I came after him for more details. He must have been repressing like mad."

"He's stronger than I thought." Clint confessed, "To come through that."

"Yes." Phil nodded.

They had made their way to the sitting room and sat in silence for a while.

"What's the final score on the Iron Man Files?" Clint asked.

He had noticed Phil constantly checking his phone since he had woken up. Clearly getting updated on developments as the files were scoured.

"Several criminal cases. Nothing as large as Stane's," Phil shrugged, "And Hammer has been ousted as an incompetent weapon designer, who knew that several of his weapons were faulty but looked the other way."

"Surprise." Clint muttered, "And SHIELD knew nothing about this? No rumours had reached our ears?"

"According to Agent Sitwell," Coulson stated, "He received all files from our intelligence assets for the business sector. He says he saw nothing that raised any flags in them. Several agents are currently scouring the files to try and find what we missed."

"If we missed this," Clint sighed, "What else did we miss?"

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There wasn't much time to wonder about that. The wedding was only days away. And before Clint knew it, he was standing as Steve's best man, watching the wedding progress.

Rhodey had managed to escape from the military once again and was standing as Tony's best man.

The witnesses were a small, but select group. In Steve's half there was Phil and Natasha and the SHIELD Agent who lived next door to Steve and claimed to be a nurse (Clint thought her name was Shana or something like that).

In Tony's half were sitting: the remnants of the Howling Commandos, although Peggy was missing (apparently she was having a bad day); Pepper was nominally the Mother of the Groom (although she had declared herself the sister); Happy was also present; then there was someone that Clint didn't recognise. He was a black man, but with a military bearing. He seemed a bit overwhelmed but certainly happy to be there.

Although Clint had had overview of the security arrangements for the wedding, Tony had point blank refused to let him do any security checks on the guests. Simply stating that anyone he was inviting to this was someone he trusted with this and would not betray him.

Clint loved the naivety that Tony could sometimes show. Even after he had been burned so badly, there was such a wonderful child-like innocence to Tony at times.

At the reception, Clint managed to sidle up to Rhodey as they watched Steve and Tony go about the traditional first dance.

"Who's he?" Clint motioned at the stranger.

"Not entirely sure." Rhodey shrugged, "Tony insisted. He's called Sam. Tony just said he was a rock and that he had a right to be here. I didn't argue. I was too busy calming Tony down from a freak out about how Steve was going to come to his senses any minute and run for the door."

"Oh," Clint blinked, "You had that too then? Steve was bemoaning the fact that Tony could have anyone so why would he settle for him? He didn't have anything to offer Tony…"

"I get the picture." Rhodey nodded, "I swear, if and when my day comes I am *not* going to be so dramatic about it."

"What's up with the roses?" Clint asked, "It almost looks like you and Tony are wearing Iron Man's colours."

Rhodey looked down at the paired red and yellow rose he was wearing as a buttonhole, before his eyes flicked to the Groom's buttonhole that Tony wore. It was a direct contrast with the white and red rose that Steve and Clint both wore for their buttonholes.

"I didn't even think about that." Rhodey breathed, "Tony went hunting through flower language dictionaries. Or rather he got Jarvis to do so. He said the pairing stood for jovial happiness. Rejoicing in their love. For marrying his friend and his love. He's had them on order with the florist for weeks."

"Steve must have done the same," Clint grinned, "He said red and white roses together stood for unity. And that they were becoming one in this marriage."

"They're saps, you realize that, right?" Rhodey remarked.

“Says the guy who had to use his hanky-chief halfway through the service.” Clint challenged.

“I have allergies.” Rhodey defended himself.

“Right,” Clint smirked, “Allergies.”

Clint moved towards the stranger, but was intercepted by Phil. The Handler moved into Clint’s personal space and gently pulled the Archer out onto the small dance floor.

“Tony remembers me.” Phil murmured softly in Clint’s ear.

“Oh God.” Clint whispered back.

“He believes that you know nothing.” Phil returned, “That I have fooled you. He has given me the Shovel Talk, should I hurt you.”

“He’s a good friend,” Clint remarked, “Misguided and uninformed. But a good friend.”

Clint finished the dance, and then, once again, went after the stranger. This time he managed to corner him.

“Clint Barton.” Clint held out his hand.

“Sam Wilson.” The man shook it firmly.

Definitely a military man, Clint decided from the firmness of the shake.

“How’d you score an invite?” Clint asked, “What’s your connection?”

“I guess you’d call me Tony’s therapist.” Sam shrugged.

“He actually *does* have a therapist?” Clint blinked, “I thought that was a joke.”

“PTSD is never a joke.” Sam countered.

“Oh, I know that.” Clint shook his head, “I just didn’t realise he’d sought human help. I thought he’d tried to bull his way through on his own.”

“Everyone needs support.” Sam smiled, “Though, I will admit, he wasn’t getting anywhere fast until he met Steve.”

“You said I’d *call* you Tony’s therapist,” Clint frowned, “What would you call yourself?”

“I’m a counsellor.” Sam laughed, “For veterans with PTSD. I’m a social worker, really. Ex-Air Force, but a social worker. I’m not trained for psychology.”

“How’d you get the job then?” Clint was confused.

“I work at a centre in DC.” Sam explained, “I run group sessions there. One day, he just turned up. Sat at the back. Against the wall. Didn’t join in. Hood, cap and shades all on. He just sat there. Watching. A lot of veterans do that at first. Still too much on edge to really engage. I’ve learned how to deal with it. I don’t demand they interact. But I don’t exclude them. I give them the opportunity to join in. It’s up to them to take it. After a few meetings sitting at the back, they generally feel safe enough to join in. He didn’t. He turned up, every week, and just sat there.

“A few of the other counsellors were worried that he was a reporter. But I’ve had that a time or two and they generally mingle and try to persuade people to talk to them to get their stories that way. He just sat there.

“Well, I say just sat there. A few of the veterans would go up to him afterwards, when we had coffee and try to talk to him. It was the usual, name, rank, company. All he would give was Tony. We started to refer to him as Tony Joe for lack of anything else to call him. He was generally known as a bit of a strange one. But he was alright. He had this habit of fixing stuff. If it was broken, he’d fix it. The heating. The lights. The TV. The computer. Anything and everything really. Even fixed a prosthetic leg once. Then turned up the next week with a brand new one. Better than anything we’d ever seen and just gave it away.

“Eventually my curiosity got the better of me. I cornered him. Asked him why he didn’t get involved. What could I do to help him? He told me he didn’t belong there. He didn’t have any right to be there.

“I get that a lot. Survivor’s Guilt. A lot of veterans have it. I told him that. And he told me he wasn’t a veteran. I was surprised, but I could tell he needed help. That he had PTSD. So I told him I didn’t care. He needed help and I would give it.

“It took hours, but I managed to prise information out of him over coffee. I got enough, from that first talk, to work out that he was a civilian contractor. That he had been captured and tortured. And that no-one rescued him. He fought his way free.

“After that, he kept coming. But I’d spend an hour or two after each group meeting just talking with him. Trying to help. I couldn’t leave him like that. He was hurting so badly and didn’t seem to have anyone who knew how to help. I had to do something. PTSD kills twenty two veterans a day. And he hadn’t had any training in how to deal with what he had seen. He had very little support that I could see. I didn’t want his death on my conscious.”

“It wouldn’t have been your fault.” Clint chided softly.

“Tell that to my heart.” Sam retorted, “I had started to care for him. Even before I really got talking with him. He’s like a kid brother to me.”

“And me.” Clint grinned, “Though if you ask him…”

“You’re the kid brother?” Sam smirked, “He told me. Talks a lot about you and Steve actually. I could tell there was something different, even before he told me about the pair of you. You’re really helping him. He’s not cured. He may not ever be cured. But he’s a hell of a lot better off than he was. I’m not so scared he’s going to disappear on me now.”

“Why did he choose you?” Clint frowned, “No offence, but by your own words you’re no expert. And he could pay for the best.”

“He said it was because he didn’t want drugs.” Sam shrugged, “But I think it’s because he just wanted someone to listen. Someone who understood. And a lot of therapists don’t. They haven’t been there. They don’t know what it was like. Empty platitudes can do as much harm as just ignoring the problem.”

“How long before you found out he was Tony Stark?” Clint asked.

“Months.” Sam laughed, “I didn’t make the connection. I knew he looked familiar. But couldn’t place him. I mean, who expects to see Tony Stark in stained jeans and a ratty looking hoodie?”

“Not many who don’t know him.” Clint conceded.

“It was after you came into the picture.” Sam recollected, “I was shocked. But by then it didn’t really matter to me. The centre still calls him Tony Joe. These days we spend most of our time sitting drinking coffee and just talking.”

“You had PTSD yourself, though?” Clint pressed.

“A close cousin.” Sam declared, “I had Survivor’s Guilt. My best friend and wingman got shot down. Could have been me. I couldn’t serve after that. Look, I won’t go into exactly what we discuss. That’s private. But, he cares for you. And he knows you care for him. And that is the most important thing of all. You give him a reason to carry on. He had reasons

before. But every single reason is one more reason for him to fight each day. You and Steve and Rhodey and Pepper and Happy. You are the reason he gets up every morning. You are the reason he lives. The reason he has a life. Rather than just an existence."

Sam ended the conversation by wandering off, apparently to talk with Pepper. But Clint was stuck running the words over in his head.

He couldn't let Tony find out about SHIELD (beyond what he already knew) or the Initiative. The sense of betrayal would probably completely destroy the genius.

Chapter 20: Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Much to everyone's surprise, after Iron Man's announcement he disappeared. There were no attacks. There were no taunts. He didn't even reappear to intimidate Doctor Doom out of New York (and therefore his territory). It was as if the armoured Supervillain had decided to retire.

That being said, there was no lack of other villains who stepped up to the mark. To take on the might of the Initiative and therefore SHIELD.

Some of the threats were dealt with by the Initiative. Others were dealt with by the STRIKE teams. Sometimes with members of the Initiative assigned to them. Sometimes without.

It was all about what was needed, when it was needed.

And right now, nearly five months after Iron Man's last appearance, Clint was bored silly. Watching scientists move around studying a little glowing blue cube was not his idea of a fun time. But orders were orders. And his orders were clear.

So Barton watched and waited for something to happen.

When it finally did, he wasn't ready. Oh, he had been ready for something. Just not that.

Not another Asgardian God.

One with apparently less muscles and more control. He did not lash out unthinking. He was controlled. He was effective. Barton pushed the Director out of the way of the blue bolt of lightning, or whatever it was.

He returned fire. But was knocked sideways and when he rose in the silence of the aftermath he was slightly senseless by his fumbled landing. He was also moving too slowly.

The Asgardian was already there. Grabbing his wrist in an unbreakable grip.

Looking into his eyes and the Asgardian must have seen something in them. Something that Barton did his best to bury when he was Barton. Something that belonged to Clint and Clint alone. But he must have been showing something.

"You have heart." That was the absolute last thing Barton expected him to say.

It was said with kindness and a strange kind of respect. As if it were something to be proud of. As if it were not something that this alien had expected to find. As if it were a treasure.

The tap of the staff on his chest was almost gentle.

The way the world seemed to change was excruciatingly slow, but also faster than Clint could assimilate. It was as if everything became clear for the first time in his life.

Get out! Get out! Get out of me! Let me go!

Everything before had simply been leading up to this. This was the way it should be. This was the way it was always meant to be. He had always been meant to serve. And wasn't it good that he had been found by such a kind Master? By such a gentle Master.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

Wasn't it good that he had been found by one who was destined to Rule? Who had always been destined to Rule?

No, no, no, no, no. No!

Everything was so simple. All he had to do was follow the orders he was given by his Lord and Master, Loki.

Let me go!

And he was favoured among all of Lord Loki's servants. Because he was the first to have been chosen. And he had been chosen specifically. Lord Loki could have chosen anyone in the room… Anyone in the World and he had chosen him. Wasn't it good? Wasn't it right?

No! Fight! Fight!

It was wrong that Fury was trying to leave. He was trying to take that which belonged to Lord Loki. That which Lord Loki needed. Lord Loki was being kind. He was asking. He was not taking. He was explaining why things had to be this way. Why Freedom was bad. Why Peace was good.

Run, Sir! Run!

Fury was not being good. He was getting in the way. He was trying to kill Lord Loki. Not that he could. After all he was a mere man. A mere mortal. And Lord Loki was a God. But he could delay Lord Loki's glorious mission. He could slow down the deliverance of Lord Loki's glorious tidings. It was Hawkeye's duty to inform Lord Loki of such treachery.

No. No.

Lord Loki ordered him to drop Fury.

NO! Don't kill. Don't kill. Don't kill!

He was not ordered to kill. He shot Fury in the chest. The man wore body armour every day, as Hawkeye well knew. But a bullet to the chest would stop the man from interfering with Lord Loki's departure. Besides it did not matter if he lived. He could not prevent Lord Loki from carrying out his quest. He could not stand in the way of Lord Loki delivering his message to the World. He was but an ant standing in the way of progress. He would either get out the way or he would be destroyed. But the destruction could wait until later.

Let me go.

To leave, first they needed vehicles. It was easy enough to commander some. Hill would hardly stop them.

Take the wheel! Then you can't shoot! Take the wheel!

Even when she was alerted, Hill was not an issue. She was easily pinned long enough for him to take the wheel and start driving Lord Loki and the Tesseract to a better location. They did not have to worry about being pursued. Lord Loki would be easily capable of preventing anyone from following them.

Drive fast! The faster you drive the faster you get away and the less time Loki has to hurt anyone!

But he did not wish for Lord Loki to concern himself with such minor matters. It was beneath him. So Hawkeye would drive fast in order to get away from their pursuit.

Good! Keep going! Don't stop!

Hill had found a faster passage. She was in the way. Hawkeye could not let her stop Lord Loki's glorious purpose. She had to get out the way. He drew his gun.

Don't kill!

Lord Loki had not ordered her death. So he would not kill her. But he could use his gun to get her out the way. It was not all that hard. He would do much harder things at his Lord Loki's command. She could chase them all she desired. If she was not in the way it didn't matter.

What was that? Go slower. Let us die here. Let us die!

He felt more than heard the destruction of the base. It was falling down around their ears. He had to travel fast. He had to protect Lord Loki. He had to assist Lord Loki to complete his mission. No one could stop him.

No! Kill him!

They emerged into the fresh air. The tunnel collapsing behind them. Hill was stuck in the tunnels. She was most likely dead and would not be interfering further. Part of Hawkeye mourned her passing. She would have made a useful assistant to Lord Loki, when he had freed her from the lie of her freedom. However there was no time to waste thoughts on what could have been. Fury had somehow gotten to the helicopter and was firing on them.

Don't miss. Kill me!

Fury was not trying to kill Lord Loki. So there was no need to retaliate. Dying in Lord Loki's service would be a noble death. It would be an honourable death. If he was meant to live Lord Loki would allow him to live. If he was meant to die then at least he would die serving Lord Loki. If his death assisted Lord Loki to deliver his message to the World, then Hawkeye would gladly die.

Just kill me! If I die this jeep crashes!

Lord Loki returned fire and took down the helicopter. Hawkeye continued driving. He would take Lord Loki anywhere he chose. He would protect Lord Loki with his life, if it were necessary. Lord Loki was the centre of his World, just as it always should have been.

Kill me!

Chapter End Notes

And I have now officially reached over 150,000 words typed for this story. I now owe my nearest reader a drink. They know who they are, and have been betting about this for over six months.

Chapter 21: Chapter 20

Hawkeye followed the instructions Lord Loki gave him. He organised transport to New York. Why Lord Loki wished to go to New York, Hawkeye did not know. He did not need to know. All he needed to know was what Lord Loki required.

What is he planning?!

The most important thing was that Fury could not find them. If Fury could not find them, the Initiative could not find them. And if the Initiative could not find them, they could not be stopped.

He has to be stopped!

Meanwhile the scientists Lord Loki had recruited could work on the Tesseract, while Hawkeye oversaw the guards who were protecting Lord Loki and his glorious work.

"The Tesserract has shown me so much!" Selvig was ecstatic, "It's more than knowledge. It's truth!"

"I know. It touches everyone differently." Lord Loki smiled indulgently. Hawkeye could tell that Lord Loki was not too interested in Selvig's discoveries, except how they related to Lord Loki's destiny.

Kill him!

"What did it show you, my little Hawk?" Loki asked. Hawkeye could see that the God was actually curious as to see what he had learned from the artefact.

"My next target." Hawkeye replied. Lord Loki had no need to worry himself with anything else that Hawkeye had been shown. His life was only important in how it could assist Lord Loki.

“Stick in the mud.” Selvig laughed; his self-obsessed superiority clear in every syllable. He believed himself to be better than Hawkeye. To be more important to Lord Loki’s glorious message than Hawkeye, because of his knowledge of science. Hawkeye thought it was a shame that Tony was not an astrophysicist. He would have been a better choice to serve Lord Loki. He had a greater need of the Peace that Lord Loki provided. He would also work better and faster. He was, after all, a genius.

No! Not Tony! Protect Tony!

“You’ve got no soul,” Selvig continued, “No wonder you chose this, this *tomb* to work in.”

“Well,” Hawkeye was angry at the implied insult, “The Radisson doesn’t have three levels of lead lined flooring. Between SHIELD and that cube…”

Hawkeye was bristling. If he had his choice he would have ensconced Lord Loki in the most luxurious palace possible. However Lord Loki had made his wishes clear. The mission came first. To that end any luxury had to be put to one side to complete Lord Loki’s goal. It was not disrespect that had caused Hawkeye to choose such ill-suited accommodation for one of Lord Loki’s status.

“I can see why Fury chose you to guard it.” Lord Loki sounded pleased and proud at Hawkeye’s knowledge of the risks.

“You’re going to have to contend with him.” Hawkeye led Lord Loki away from the scientist, “As long as he’s in the air, I can’t pin him down. He’s got a team. And he will be expanding it.”

Don’t tell him! Don’t!

“Are they a threat?” Lord Loki was irritated about the suggestion of an obstacle in his path.

“The original team alone would not be,” Hawkeye shrugged, “There are only two currently active members. However Fury has another member who assists and the plans for the Initiative do include at least one other member that I am aware of. Together they are a threat, to each other more than likely, but if Fury can get them on track, then he might be able to throw some noise our way.”

“You admire Fury.” Lord Loki accused.

“He’s got a clear line of sight.” Hawkeye confessed. By his standards one of the highest compliments he could give.

“Is that why you failed to kill him?” Lord Loki’s voice was cold.

Hawkeye froze for a moment. He had failed Lord Loki? He had misunderstood Lord Loki’s desires? He had thought that Lord Loki had not ordered Fury’s death. But Lord Loki had thought that he hadn’t needed to state such an order. He had thought it was implied. He had not done right by Lord Loki.

“It might be,” Hawkeye conceded, “I was disorientated. And I’m not at my best with a gun.”

Hawkeye knew they were empty excuses. He should have been better. Lord Loki had chosen him to be his chief guard, at least for now. So he should have been better. He should have done what was required of him by Lord Loki.

“I want to know everything you can tell me about this team of his. I will… Test… Their mettle. I’m weary of scuttling in the shadows. I need to rule this world, not borrow it.”

It was right that Lord Loki would rule the world. However Hawkeye knew they could not move until Selvig had completed the science project of the Tesseract. Hawkeye knew it was not Selvig’s fault that he was slow to work. There was no doubt that the work was difficult and would of course take time. However Tony would have been quicker. If he had studied Astrophysics.

Forget Tony! Forget about him!

Hawkeye shook his head slightly. He didn’t understand why his mind kept returning to Tony. He needed to serve Lord Loki. He could not afford for his mind to get distracted.

“Of course, my Lord.” Hawkeye bowed his head respectfully, “It’s a risk.”

“Oh, yes.” Lord Loki smiled. He looked like he was relishing the idea of the challenge. Hawkeye knew that inactivity could easily become stifling to himself. How much worse would it be for one such as Lord Loki?

“You’re set on making yourself known,” Hawkeye accepted his Lord Loki’s decision, “I could be useful.”

If his Lord Loki was going to fight, Hawkeye wanted to be there to protect him from the underhanded blow. Not that Lord Loki couldn’t defend himself. But he shouldn’t need to exert himself in such a way. And there were those who were too insignificant to deserve the honour of being slaughtered at Lord Loki’s hand.

“Tell me what you need.” Lord Loki was firm, but also excited at the possibility.

The tight ball of worry inside Hawkeye relaxed slightly. His Lord Loki still trusted him. Still believed he had some value. He would not be cast aside for a more worthy candidate. He was still of use. He could still serve Lord Loki.

He stalked over to where his bow was lying, still in its case. He’d managed to pick it up in all the earlier confusion. He took out his bow and jerked it into its proper form.

Kill him!

“I need a distraction and an eyeball.” Hawkeye informed Lord Loki.

He had no doubt that Lord Loki could achieve both of these things. Though how he did not know. It was enough to know that that was what he needed and therefore that Lord Loki could provide it. Everything was so much *simpler* now.

Kill him! Stop him! Do something!

The confident, but also proud, smile that Lord Loki gave him reassured him. Lord Loki knew that he had a plan and knew that he would be able to carry it out successfully for the glory of Lord Loki.

"Tell me your plan, my little Hawk." Lord Loki instructed, "Then tell me of Fury's team."

Don't!

It was easy for Hawkeye to lay out his plan. Lord Loki stood there smiling his approval. He was doing what Lord Loki desired. Telling him about the team was just as easy. Though he knew he did not have to go into details in certain areas. What did it matter to Lord Loki that the Black Widow had been trained as a ballet dancer to such an extent that she could pass as one, should it become required? What did it matter if Captain America loved to draw and was actually an extremely talented artist? What did it matter if War Machine was a highly skilled engineer? What did it matter that Bruce Banner had spent a good amount of time in Calcutta as a doctor?

None of these facts would help or hinder Lord Loki in his mission. Therefore it was not necessary to burden him with the information.

Lord Loki required information about their abilities and personalities. He had need of information about their personal histories that had shaped the people they had become today. He needed to know their strengths and their weaknesses.

"You have provided me with much information, my little Hawk." Lord Loki had taken it all on board, "However you have not provided me with the Soldier's weakness."

No! Not Tony!

"Captain America is married," Hawkeye spoke softly, "His husband is his weakness. He is called Tony Stark."

“The great Captain America has a husband?” Lord Loki was surprised, “Is not his husband well-guarded?”

“Tony Stark is unaware of his husband’s status.” Hawkeye informed him, “We have worked hard to keep him ignorant of SHIELD and anything to do with it.”

“I would imagine he is fair of face indeed,” Lord Loki mused, “In order to captivate the Soldier.”

Protect Tony!

“My Lord,” Hawkeye knelt down, “I would ask a boon.”

“What is your boon, my little Hawk?” Lord Loki sounded amused, but Hawkeye could not see his eyes, his head bent as it was.

“Tony Stark is an incredibly gifted scientist and inventor,” Hawkeye explained, “He would do great things in your service.”

“You wish me not to harm him,” Lord Loki breathed, “To refrain from using violence against him in order to use him as a weapon against the Soldier.”

“My Lord,” Hawkeye continued, “Tony Stark has been hurt grievously in the past. By those who would dare to command him. Such a mind as his should only ever be commanded by yourself. He is worthy indeed of your gift of freedom. However due to his history, he will rage against it. He will fight at first. From fear and misunderstanding of what you are offering to the World. I would ask that you allow me to calm him, before you claim him as one of your own. I would rather he not have memories of fear, which I can prevent, my Lord.”

“You care for him, my little Hawk.”

“Tony Stark is like a brother to me, my Lord.”

“You believe he would serve me well?”

“In one month,” Hawkeye elaborated, “He designed and built the suit of armour used by War Machine. When held captive by the Ten Rings in Afghanistan he built a weapon, which he then used to kill all of those who held him captive, before escaping.”

“A fierce spirit.” Lord Loki agreed, “Indeed one whom I would be interested in freeing personally. I shall consider your boon, my little Hawk. For now, you must content yourself with the fact that using Stark against the Soldier is not beneficial to my current plans.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

“Arise,” Lord Loki instructed, “You have much work to do.”

Hawkeye rose and started to organise the men. Lord Loki was right. They had much to do and little time to do it in.

Chapter 22: Chapter 21

Allowing Lord Loki to be captured rankled for Hawkeye. Lord Loki was meant to be worshiped and obeyed. He was not meant to be chained and shackled like a common criminal. It was beneath him.

Yes! Now don't let him go!

Yet this was the way that Lord Loki had instructed things were to play out. In order to fully test the mettle of the Initiative Lord Loki wished to be inside SHIELD's walls.

And now, Hawkeye was to carry out the next part of the plan. He had to damage the Helicarrier.

No! You'll kill them!

Of course he could not simply down the flying fortress. As slight as it was, there was still the risk that he could harm Lord Loki. So the damage had to be enough to cripple. Yet still allow the great machine the ability to land safely.

There! Aim there!

And that was the perfect place to aim. It would damage the Helicarrier sufficiently. However with time it was fixable. Though it would require no water in the engine. So it would have to be fixed in the dry docks. By the time that had been completed the entirety of Lord Loki's glorious purpose would have been completed.

Hawkeye drew back his bow and fired.

His shot was clean and true. Just as it had always been. And just as it should always be in Lord Loki's service.

The explosion rocked the flying fortress and the helicopter as well. But it was of no matter to Hawkeye as he readied his next shot.

There! Aim there!

That shot also flew straight to its target. However Hawkeye had no time to think about that. He was already working on boarding the crippled and dying vessel.

While Lord Loki would not require his presence to rescind his captivity, Hawkeye would feel better knowing that no-one who was not worthy was able to touch Lord Loki.

He moved quickly through the corridors, knowing that he would most likely find Lord Loki in or near the Hulk's cell. If Lord Loki was not there, Hawkeye could then follow Lord Loki's path to locate him.

It rankled that SHEILD would use a monster's prison to hold his Lord Loki. But that was only because SHIELD had not understood what Lord Loki was offering. They did not understand the message that he brought.

Everything would be alright once Lord Loki had completed his glorious purpose. Everybody would be safe and nobody would ever get hurt again. *Tony* would be safe.

No! You're wrong! Listen to me!

He knew that the other soldiers in Lord Loki's service would be working on neutralising the Initiative members and any SHIELD Agents who got in their way.

He heard footsteps behind him.

Instantly he turned and drew his bow, ready to attack.

It was the Black Widow.

Natasha!

She was an obstacle to Lord Loki's path. She was getting between him and Lord Loki. But also, more importantly she was between Lord Loki and the completion of his glorious purpose. Either she would get out the way, or Hawkeye would take her out.

Stop me!

Hawkeye was angry. She would not get out his way. And he while he could read many of her moves, she could do the same to him. He was finding himself hard-pressed to defeat her. And defeat her he must. Lord Loki expected it of him. He must not disappoint Lord Loki. He could *not* fail Lord Loki.

Kill me!

The advantage of the fight switched sides many times. The two of them used everything they had. They used their surroundings to assist them in their fight as much as they used their weapons.

Kill me!

A sharp piercing and tearing pain shot through his drawing arm, as the Black Widow tore into his flesh with her teeth. The pain was enough to distract him, so that she could reposition herself and ram his head into one of the railings.

Disorientated and groggy, Clint fell to the floor. He was trying to make sense of all the different and conflicting thoughts that ran through his head. He wanted to die. He wanted to serve. He wanted to worship Lord Loki. He wanted to kill him. He wanted Tony near Lord Loki. He didn't want Loki to even *look* at Tony.

From his knees he looked up at Natasha.

"Natasha." He said her name like it was his salvation and the one possible source of explanation as to what was going on.

She knocked him out.

123456789

When Clint came round he was half propped up. His head hurt and was muzzy. He shook it to try and shake the cobwebs out. He went to move his hands to his head.

But he was stopped by something firm that wrapped around his wrists, keeping them by his sides.

"Clint," Natasha's voice was soft, but firm, "You're going to be alright."

The sudden flood of memories struck him. Every deed he had done. Every word he had said. Everything in the name of Loki. But it had been his hands, his actions, his voice that had done them.

"You know that?" Clint half-spat, half-begged, "Is that what you know?"

Because he wanted her to be right. But he equally knew that she couldn't be, because he had done all of that. It was his fault. He had killed innocents. Worse he had killed people he knew. People who trusted him. He had betrayed them. He was a traitor.

“I got…” Clint took a deep breath. A cleansing breath, “I gotta go in though. I gotta flush him out.”

Clint knew he was the only one who knew anywhere near the full extent of Loki’s plans. He had to tell what he knew. But also he wanted a chance to fight Loki. Loki had made Clint his puppet to Loki’s puppet master. Loki would learn to rue the day he did that.

“We don’t have that long,” Natasha pointed out, “It’s gonna take time.”

She was right, Clint knew that. Loki needed to be defeated now. And it would take days, at best, for Clint to be cleared psychologically alone. More likely it would take weeks, if not months, before Clint would be allowed out in the field again.

“I don’t understand.” Clint knew he was lying. He didn’t *want* to understand why SHIELD would be so unwilling to trust him. He knew why.

But also he didn’t understand why it had been so easy for Loki to get inside his head. He didn’t understand why Loki had chosen him to lead his guards. He didn’t understand why he had done what he had. Why it had been so simple when he had been under Loki’s control. Why he had said what he had. There were times, looking back, he could see that he had not chosen the best decision. But that was hindsight.

“Have you ever had someone take your brain and play? Pull you out and send something else in? Do you know what it's like to be unmade?”

“You know that I do.” Natasha countered.

And yes, he did. He knew she did. It had been cruel to lash out at her like that. But he was hurting and wanted someone else to hurt like he did.

“Why am I back?” Clint had to know, “How did you get him out?”

He had tried everything he had. Screaming inside his own head. A tiny little voice, a little tiny part of him that understood what was going on. That had known that what he was doing was wrong. But it had been unable to do anything.

"Cognitive recalibration." Natasha shrugged.

Clint looked at her in confusion.

"I hit you really hard in the head." She explained further.

"Thanks." Clint's word was heartfelt.

Natasha leant over him and undid the straps, without him asking. He knew why. She knew that he was free from what Loki had done to him. She had seen it in his face. She had heard it in his words. Not just the words spoken, but also the tone.

"Tasha," Clint looked her in the eyes, "How many Agents?"

He wanted to know. He *had* to know. How many people were not going home because of him. How many people had his actions killed.

"Don't." Natasha cut his train of thought off, "Don't do that to yourself, Clint. This is Loki. This is monsters and magic and nothing we were ever trained for."

She was right. But that didn't help Clint. He could know something in his brain. But his heart wouldn't accept it. He had never been used like that before. And he never wanted to be used like that again.

"Loki, he got away?" Clint pressed.

But he knew the truth. He knew that Loki had escaped.

"Yeah," Natasha agreed, "I don't suppose you know where?"

Clint didn't have to search his brain very hard to know the answer.

"I didn't need to know," Clint shook his head, "I didn't ask. He's gonna make his play soon enough. Today."

But where and when, Clint didn't know. The precise details hadn't been needed when he was under Loki's control.

"We gotta stop him." Natasha declared.

"Yeah?" Clint challenged, "Who's we?"

It was question that needed to be answered. Who was left? The Helicarrier was barely limping. It would never get anywhere in time. And who could leave? Which of the STRIKE teams were in the right place? Which of them were still able to fight?

"I don't know," Natasha shrugged, "Whoever's left."

She didn't say who was left. Clint knew it was likely that she didn't know. Likely that she hadn't yet asked. Natasha had never been one to worry about the dead. She was only concerned with the living. The dead were dead; there was nothing she could do to change that. They could not help her. They could not hurt her. They were not her concern.

Natasha probably had been waiting to see if Clint was back to himself, rather than dealing with the chaos going on everywhere else. She was a loyal friend.

“Well, if I put an arrow in Loki's eye-socket, I'd sleep better I suppose.” Clint confessed.

“Now you sound like you.” Natasha sat down next to him.

“But you don’t,” Clint accused, “You’re a spy, not a soldier. Now you want to wade into a war. Why? What did Loki do to you?”

Again not a fair comment. Natasha had been doing her fair share of soldiering as part of the Initiative. Though in SHIELD her actions leant more towards spy than soldier.

And the questioning about Loki wasn’t fair either. Despite Natasha’s protestations that love was for children, she loved in her own way. To her Clint was a brother. An annoying little brother. But unlike when Tony thought of him in that manner Clint would accept it from Natasha.

Natasha could beat him in a fight. Although it would usually be a long, drawn out fight.

And while Natasha didn’t publicise it, she was protective towards people she considered hers. Hurt one of them, and if she could, she would make you pay for it.

“He didn't, I just…” Natasha tailed off.

Clint knew she couldn’t voice it. It wasn’t in her nature. Natasha showed her intentions though actions not words.

“Natasha.” Clint cut her off, wanting to apologise for the question.

“I've been compromised. I got red in my ledger. I'd like to wipe it out.” Natasha found an answer she was comfortable with. However it reminded Clint of something.

“Tony,” Clint whispered, “We have to find him. He needs to be protected.”

“Why?” Natasha frowned.

“Loki wanted to know everyone’s weakness. I told him Tony was Steve’s.” Clint explained, “He has an interest in Tony. We have to get him somewhere safe. Please,

Natasha!”

“He is safe.” Natasha was firm, “The Director had him brought in to help with finding the Tesseract.”

“He’s not an astrophysicist.” Clint argued, “It’s not his field.”

“He’s smarter than nearly everyone else,” Natasha reminded, “And I’ll deny it if you tell him. He literally became an expert on it overnight with research. He’s been working with Doctor Banner. I think they found a way to track the Tesseract.”

“He’s safe.” Clint relaxed slightly, “Good.”

For a moment, the two of them sat in silence.

But it was only a moment. They knew they had work to do.

Chapter 23: Chapter 22

They walked onto the bridge together. Their masks firmly in place, because they knew there was a risk that Tony was on the bridge.

And there he was; Clint felt all the tension and worry he had been building up about Tony's safety seeped out of him. However outwardly nothing visibly showed.

Tony was hovering by the table, carefully picking up scattered cards. A few were in Captain America's hand, but he willingly handed them over to Tony when he held out his hand. Tony gathered them to his chest and held them as if they were a source of comfort to him. He was clearly dishevelled and had a few scrapes and bruises visible. But overall he looked unharmed, despite everything that had happened.

"It will be today." The Black Widow declared, "Hawkeye does not know where."

Tony flinched away from her slightly… No, it wasn't her exactly, Hawkeye noticed. It was her almost toneless voice.

"So," The Director snapped, "To recap… The Hulk is running loose. Loki is free to do whatever he wants. And he's going to do it today. The only thing you can tell me, Stark, is that he needs a lot of electricity to do whatever it is he's going to do with the Tesseract. My Helicarrier is basically dead in the water. And somewhere along the line *Iron Man* turned up! What the hell did he want? Is he with Loki?"

"I don't think so." Captain America countered, "He helped fix the engine. He's the reason we're not *in* the water at the moment. And it was at the risk of his own life."

"Well, that's at least *one* problem we can shelve for now." The Director declared, "But we still have Loki. He could be going anywhere in the world. Most likely a power station."

"No." Tony slipped the cards into his pocket, "You've got him wrong."

"Oh, really, Stark?" The Director turned on him, "What makes you such an expert in violence and enemies? At this level? You've never had to deal with anything worse than a bunch of terrorists in a *cave*! Loki is a threat. And you're a fool if you can't see that."

“That wasn’t what I was saying.” Tony smirked, “He’s not going to go to a power station. They’re too isolated for him. And no, I’m not an expert in violence. Nor am I an expert in enemies. But I am expert in isolation. I am an expert in attention seeking. And I am an expert businessman.”

“And what does that have to do with anything?” Hill challenged.

“Because while you’ve been running around trying to figure out Loki’s next move and his big plan,” Tony looked her in the eye, “I’ve been thinking about the man. Or rather the Asgardian. He’s a businessman.”

“No,” Captain America frowned, “He’s not. He’s a threat.”

“A businessman,” Tony repeated, “And the most important part of being a businessman is being a showman. And this, Ladies and Gentlemen… This is Opening Night! And you don’t do a show in the middle of nowhere. Where no one can appreciate it. You do it where *everyone* can see it. For the biggest audience you can manage.”

“A city then.” The Director acknowledged the correction, “He will want a source of power that cannot be turned off. Something that will be under his command. A supply of generators. A hospital or prison.”

“No, no, no.” Tony shook his head, “That’s what he *needs*. Opening *Night*! This isn’t about what he *needs*. It’s about what he *wants*! He’ll want flowers. He’ll want parades. He’ll want a monument built in the skies. He’ll want his name up in lights… Son of a… He’ll be at Stark Tower.”

“You’re sure?” Captain America breathed in shock and horror.

“I’m the only name in clean energy right now.” Tony stated, “Mine is the only building that gives him what he wants and what he needs in the same place. He’ll be there… My *husband* will be there!”

“We will deal with it.” Captain America stated as he rose to his feet.

Hawkeye kept his face carefully blank. But he knew that behind his mask his eyes were sparking with slight amusement. Tony was worried about his husband. But his husband was in the room with him.

“Pick up your weapons.” Captain America addressed him and the Black Widow, “We move now.”

123456789

It was almost amusing when one of the younger pilots tried to deny the team's access to a plane.

But before long they were on board and flying to their destination.

"I hope Tony's right about this." Captain America murmured.

"He is." Hawkeye declared firmly, "Cap… I… I told Loki about Tony. About what he is to you. He became fascinated with Tony."

"It wasn't your fault." Captain America replied softly, "I know you. You'd never do anything that could put Tony at risk. I trust you with his life."

"Maybe you shouldn't." Hawkeye muttered, "I should have been better. I should have been stronger."

"I should have been faster." Captain America countered, "I should have been stronger. I should have been better prepared. I should have taken him down harder. If I had, Bucky would still be alive."

"That wasn't your fault." Hawkeye proclaimed, "You did everything you could."

"And I know you did the same." Captain America smirked confidently, "Because you couldn't do anything less. You were up against something you had no idea how to counter. And at least you have a chance to make everything right. What I would do to be able to get Bucky back… Well, if wishes were horses…"

"Yeah." Hawkeye agreed.

His heart was certainly feeling lighter now. The Captain hadn't managed to assuage all his doubts and fears and blame. But he had made things easier. Hawkeye could at least prevent whatever was going to happen from happening. He could fix the problem he had helped cause.

"You said Iron Man fixed the Helicarrier?" Hawkeye changed the topic.

"Yes." The Captain nodded, "It was the stran… Well, I *would* say it was the strangest thing, but after the rest of this week… He came out of nowhere. I don't even know how he knew we were in trouble. But he turned up and told me how to fix it, while he kicked started the turbine… From inside it. He pushed the blades."

“That should have killed him.” The Black Widow remarked.

“I pulled a red lever,” Captain America shrugged, “It slowed the blades long enough for him to get out. But he didn’t think twice about it.”

“He clearly knows his engines.” The Black Widow remarked, “The designs for those are not well known. Although I am told they can be figured out by a sufficiently competent engineer or scientist.”

“That isn’t our problem now.” Captain America reminded them, “We are not currently trying to identify Iron Man. Leave that for later. Right now, Loki is our priority.”

123456789

When they arrived in New York it was easy to see that they were too late to stop what had already begun. A large portal had opened in the sky and what had to be aliens were pouring through.

But just because they’d been unable to stop it from happening didn’t mean that they couldn’t reverse it. They would fight and they would defeat the aliens. Driving them back from where they came.

The fighting had already begun. But it wasn’t just terrified civilians with whatever they had on hand. It wasn’t just police officers doing their best to face something they had never been trained for or even anticipated.

Up on Stark Tower, Thor could be seen fighting Loki; both of them definitely putting their all into it.

However it seemed that Iron Man was not just satisfied with one good deed for the day. He was clearly visible fighting the aliens with everything he had.

Hawkeye simply blinked in slight surprise and opened a channel to Iron Man, hoping against hope that the armoured villain would be inclined to talk to them and willing to work together against a greater foe.

“Iron Man,” The Black Widow spoke for them, “We’re on your three. Headed north east.”

“What,” Iron Man’s voice sounded, even with the mechanical distortion, tense, “Did you stop for drive through? Swing up Park. I’m gonna lay ‘em out for you.”

It was clear from that alone that Iron Man was not only willing to fight alongside them; he fully *expected* to. It seemed that the Supervillain knew he couldn’t win by himself. And so was prepared to forget past grudges. At least for a while.

Working as the well-oiled partnership that they were, Hawkeye and the Black Widow maneuverered their plane through the buildings of New York taking out any of the enemy that they could.

Hawkeye made an attempt to shoot Loki on the balcony of Stark Tower. But it was doomed to failure as Loki struck first. His blow caused the quinjet to catch one engine on fire. With an engine down a crash was inevitable. However the two of them managed to land semi-safely.

They emerged and stood in the middle of the chaos, just in time to see, what to Hawkeye, looked like an armoured sea-monster from ancient Greece emerge from the portal with a primal roar of rage.

And despite the fear that it caused to settle in Hawkeye’s heart, he *wished* that it was the only problem they had right then. Because as bad as it was, he knew that with enough time they would find a solution to dealing with it.

But the other smaller aliens were still present. And more were dismounting from the monster above their heads. They clung to buildings and shot at civilians.

“Iron Man,” Captain America took the chance that he was still listening, “Are you seeing this?”

“I’m seeing.” Iron Man responded quickly, but almost neutrally, “Still working on believing. Where’s Banner? Has he shown up yet?”

“Banner?” Captain America blinked in shock.

Hawkeye couldn’t fully restrain his surprise either. Iron Man knew that Banner had been with them. Knew that Banner was no longer with them. And somehow believed that Banner would turn up to help.

“Keep me posted.” Iron Man instructed, not halting in his fighting for a moment.

Hawkeye watched with awe and amazement as Iron Man turned his attention to the leviathan above them. As always the villain moved with a grace almost supernatural in its beauty.

Apart from the Black Widow, Iron Man was the only person Hawkeye knew who could make a fight look like a dance.

But he had no time to watch and marvel at Iron Man’s display of skill. He had a war to fight.

And a war it was. Chaos and blood and violence and screams.

The three of them did what they could. They fought and protected and shielded. But there was always the enemy. There was always more of the enemy.

Hawkeye pushed that part of him that screamed it was hopeless down. He locked it away in a small box in his mind. If he believed there was no hope then there would be no hope. If he believed even for one *second* that they would lose, then they would lose. If he was distracted for a moment then he would die.

Now there was no time for second guessing. No time for doubting.

The drums of war sounded in his soul and he fought.

The banter with the Captain and the Black Widow was automatic. It calmed his soul and renewed his purpose.

They spread out, but came back together when Thor electrocuted all of the aliens in the immediate vicinity. He landed near them, clearly marking that he counted himself as one of them in this fight.

"What's the story upstairs?" The Captain demanded.

"The powers surrounding the cube is impenetrable." Thor states firmly.

"Thor is right," Iron Man cuts in, clearly having somehow heard them, "We gotta deal with these guys."

"How do we do this?" The Black Widow asked.

She, like Hawkeye, needed some direction. They had always looked to the Captain in lesser situations like this in the past. It was only natural to look to him now. Even with the additional members in their ranks.

"As a team." Captain America declared firmly.

"I have unfinished business with Loki." Thor pointed out.

"Yeah?" Hawkeye retorted raising an eyebrow behind his mask, "Get in line."

"Save it." Captain America forced them to stow the brewing fight, "Loki's gonna keep this fight focused on us. And that's what we need. Without him these things could run wild. We got Iron Man up top, he's gonna need us…"

A small motor sounded behind them. It shouldn't have caught their attention, but it did. Almost as one they turned to face the man dismounting from a small, ancient motorbike.

It was Banner. Dressed in what looked to be a workman's clothes.

"So," Banner shrugged looking around, "This all seems horrible."

“I’ve seen worse.” The Black Widow was slightly dismissive.

“Sorry.” Banner’s apology was firm, but simple.

“No,” The Black Widow’s voice softened slightly, Hawkeye knew most people wouldn’t have noticed it, “We could use a little worse.”

“Iron Man,” Captain America addressed the villain, “We got him.”

“Banner?” Iron Man asked for confirmation.

“Just like you said.” Captain America agreed.

“Tell him to suit up.” Iron Man instructed, “I’m bringing the party to you.”

Iron Man lead the monster directly towards them. Hawkeye vaguely heard the Black Widow mutter something, but he was too busy taking in the sight of the creature they would have to kill somehow.

“Doctor Banner,” The Captain addressed the scientist, who was walking towards the oncoming leviathan, “Now might be a really good time for you to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Captain,” Banner smiled back at them, “I’m always angry.”

And just like that he turned away, his skin rippling as it changed colour and his size doubled, growing muscles and becoming a huge green ball of rage.

In moments the monster was dead at the hands of the Hulk and Iron Man, who somehow, despite their glaringly obvious differences, worked like a well-oiled unit.

Hawkeye took cover behind a nearby car to protect himself from the falling debris.

With their monster dead the aliens started to scream in anger. The group of heroes found themselves forming into a loose circle. All of them readying their weapons for the next stage of the battle. Iron Man lightly touched down in the space left for him. The Hulk roared back at the cries of rage.

And underneath the aliens' screeches, Hawkeye could just pick out the shouts of joy and celebration from the civilians.

The Black Widow was the first to see it. Through the portal emerged three more leviathans. She softly called their attention to it. She did not panic. But Hawkeye could sense the trepidation in her. It had taken the Hulk and Iron Man to defeat one of the creatures. Three could be beyond their capabilities. And it was easily possible that more would emerge, given that they had only sent one before, but were now utilising three.

"Call it Cap." Hawkeye wanted directions.

But more than that, he wanted directions from someone he could trust. Someone he knew would make the right call.

"Alright, listen up." The Captain adapted quickly, "Until we can close that portal up there, we're gonna use containment. Hawkeye, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Iron Man, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash."

"Wanna give me a lift?" Hawkeye asked Iron Man.

It was a great deal of trust that he was giving the retired(?) Supervillain, but for some reason Hawkeye felt that it would not be misplaced. There was something hauntingly familiar about Iron Man's speech. Though it was not really all that different from what he had joked and jested and taunted them with in all their previous encounters.

"Right." Iron Man agreed, "Better clench up, Legolas."

The flight was short. But it was controlled. The grip on the back of his vest firm and secure. He had no fear of falling whether by accident or purpose.

As he travelled to his Overwatch position he heard the Cap give the rest of the team orders. He was faintly amused at the instruction given to the Hulk and the enthusiasm the big guy used to carry out those orders, but quickly pushed that aside.

He had a job to do. And a team to protect.

"Iron Man, you've got a lot of strings sticking to your tail." He altered.

"Just trying to keep them off the streets." Iron Man pointed out.

Though Hawkeye couldn't tell much by the mechanical tone of the voice that came over the earpiece, he could get a lot of information from the pace of the words. Iron Man was having difficulty taking them down. Understandable really, he would eventually run out of weapons in his suit. No doubt he was keeping them for the bigger threats.

"Well," Hawkeye suggested, "They can't bank worth a damn. Find a tight corner."

"I will roger that." Iron Man replied.

Once again it wasn't the tone that provided information. However this time it was the wording. Iron Man had had some exposure to military terms. But he had not been military. The usage was off. The phrasing was wrong. So either he had watched too many (but also not enough) military films or he knew someone in the military. And now was *not* the time to try and figure out Iron Man's identity. That could wait until later. Or maybe not at all.

And Hawkeye was leaning towards not at all. If it wasn't for Iron Man, he wasn't sure that they would have lasted this long. Certainly there would be more civilian casualties.

Working together they took out Iron Man's tails. Hawkeye had to supress a shiver at how *natural* it seemed to be working alongside Iron Man.

"Nice call." Iron Man complimented once the aliens following him were dead, "What else you got?"

“Well, Thor’s taking on a squadron down on sixth.” Hawkeye supplied.

“And he didn’t invite me?” Iron Man gave the impression that he was upset about it. Then he sped off to join Thor.

Hawkeye continued to watch over the battle. He was surprised to notice just how protective Hulk was. Often coming between civilians and an alien. No matter if it meant he had to leave a fight behind. For something that he had been led to believe was a monster, the Hulk was incredibly human.

He half-listened, half-ignored the conversation between the Black Widow and Captain America about how to end the battle. They weren’t addressing him. His input wasn’t needed. And he still had a job to do.

However he did notice when Iron Man came to the Black Widow’s defence for a moment without being asked. Then dashed along to back Captain America up. Before flying off to help Hawkeye himself. It was like he was everywhere on the battlefield all at once.

But then again it was like *everyone* was *everywhere*. And the amount of teamwork being used, even between those who had never worked together before and normally would have had no inclination to fight together was incredible.

Hawkeye kept his directions going. Advising the Captain of places that needed help. Of trapped civilians.

He knew that the Captain had to pull his cowl back on at least once. But even though the battle looked hopeless, they had to assume that they would win. And therefore their identities would need to remain a secret. After all, Tony had to be kept ignorant and safe from all of this later.

When the Black Widow called for assistance, Clint blinked at what he saw.

“Nat,” He breathed, “What are you doing?”

"Uh…" She didn't really have an answer for him, "A little help?"

He made his arrow selection. He knew exactly what he needed to do.

"I've got him." Clint smirked. This arrow was for everything Loki had made him do. For everything that Loki had made him feel.

He aimed. Careful to pick his target as Loki's eye.

He wasn't even all that surprised when the Asgardian caught the arrow. The smug look on Loki's face would have made him angry, but Clint knew what was coming next.

The explosion was beautiful. Even if Loki survived it and was thrown back into Stark Tower.

Hawkeye, once again, half-listened, half-ignored what the Black Widow was saying. She wasn't addressing him. He didn't need to know.

He watched in slight shock and horror as Iron Man flew into one of the leviathans. Before he came bursting out of the back. He was clearly damaged in some way, and almost immediately started taking hits from the smaller aliens.

But Hawkeye had problems of his own. The smaller aliens had at last managed to reach his position and overrun it. And while he could fight back in the short term, he was also out of arrows.

He managed to reclaim an arrow and zip-line himself to safety. However the battle had been taking its toll and crashing through a window was not advisable at the best of times. He lay on the floor surrounded by shattered glass for a moment.

Then he heard the sweetest music in his ears. The Black Widow declaring to all that she could close the portal. They could stop the invasion. They could stop the enemy numbers

from increasing.

"Do it!" The Captain ordered.

"No, wait!" Iron Man countered.

"Iron Man!" Captain America protested, "These things are still coming!"

"I got a nuke coming in." Iron Man's voice was strangely flat, even for mechanised speech, "It's gonna blow in less than a minute. And I know just where to put it."

Hawkeye immediately figured out what he meant. And he immediately saw the problem with it too.

"Iron Man," The Captain's voice was soft and awe-filled, "You know that's a one way trip?"

There was no response. There didn't need to be. Hawkeye knew that Iron Man knew. And he knew that Captain America knew.

To save the city, Iron Man was going to sacrifice himself. A Supervillain would die for the city.

As Iron Man disappeared out of sight, Hawkeye found himself whispering:

"Sometimes the only good guys you get are bad guys."

But that didn't make them any less good.

He stood as a silent sentinel watching the portal. He watched as it stayed open for longer than it should… But still less than it needed.

He watched as it started to close. He watched as at the last moment a small figure fell through the portal. Returning to the planet where he belonged.

And in the seeing a tiny part of Hawkeye unknotted. A tiny part of him relaxed in relief.

But as he watched he saw that Iron Man was not moving. He was falling, yes. But he was making no attempt to recover from his fall.

Was he dead? Was he alive? Was he injured?

If no-one caught him he would die. But Hawkeye could do nothing. He had no arrows. He could not fly. He could not save Iron Man.

All he could do was watch.

And he never hated his eyesight more than at that moment. For he was watching the death of a good man. A good man who had felt forced to do evil deeds.

He thought to himself that there was no worse feeling than this.

Then, out of seemingly nowhere, the Hulk swept in and caught Iron Man. Carrying him away from the rest of the team.

Hawkeye scurried down from his perch. He rushed to join up with Captain America and Thor, who were both staring slightly in shock at where Hulk had swung away.

The Hulk's roar reached them, from where he had taken Iron Man.

"What just happened?" Iron Man's voice reached them over the earpieces.

“We won.” Captain America replied after a moment’s pause. A moment of relief.

Hawkeye tripped over his own feet, but quickly recovered. The sheer relief washing through him was immense. He didn’t cause Iron Man to die. The armoured warrior still lived.

“Alright. Hey. Alright. Good job, guys. Let's just not come in tomorrow. Let's just take a day.”

Clint didn’t bother to smother his smile. He could see Steve smiling too. Iron Man sounded so human in that moment. So wonderfully, brilliantly human and *alive*.

“We’re not finished yet.” Thor pointed out.

And no they weren’t. But Hawkeye didn’t think that would take long to clear up. If Loki was capable he would have done *something* to stop the Black Widow. Therefore he was incapacitated somehow.

They arrived just in time to watch Loki pull himself off the floor and turn to face them.

“Not so lost perhaps.” Loki conceded.

“No.” Iron Man was the only one who spoke, “More lost than you can ever imagine.”

“I could come to like you, Iron Man.” Loki remarked.

“Reindeer Games,” Iron Man leaned forward slightly, “I’m selfish, impatient and a little insecure. I make mistakes, I am out of control and at times hard to handle. But if you can’t handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don’t deserve me at my best. And you couldn’t handle me at my worst, not even in your wildest dreams. Have a good life. The rest of you… I hope I never have to see you again. I have a retirement to enjoy.”

Iron Man turned and flew off. Hawkeye didn’t even bother turning to watch. He was having too much trouble restraining himself from letting go. He’d managed to reclaim an arrow as

they'd made their way to this position. And right now he was reminding himself of all the reasons he *couldn't* just shoot Loki in the head.

There were far too few of them.

Thor stepped forward and physically restrained Loki. Steve put a hand on Clint's shoulder, forcing him to relax. To take the tension off the bowstring.

Clint would never be certain whether it was a good or a bad thing that Steve had done that.

Chapter 24: Chapter 23

The debrief seemed to take forever. Agent Barton sat through it as patiently as he could pretend.

But his phone sat like a red hot coal in his pocket. He'd grabbed it when he'd come back from the field. Grabbed it when he changed back into Agent Barton gear. There was a missed call on it. A missed message from Tony.

God only knew what the man had been thinking, trapped on the Helicarrier knowing that people were under attack in Manhattan. That people were *dying* in Manhattan. And knowing, however falsely, that Clint was there. That *Steve* was there.

But he hadn't had time to check the message. He didn't need to immediately. After all, Tony was safe. He was on the Helicarrier. Nowhere near the chaos that still reigned in Manhattan.

He felt the phone buzz again. But ignored it. He couldn't answer it anyway.

Finally, *finally*, Barton was allowed out the room. The debrief over.

He walked back to his bunk. He picked up the phone and frowned. The second missed call was from Tony. But now there was no record of the earlier missed call from Tony. He was sure there had been one. But why would it vanish?

He was jerked from his thoughts when the door to his bunk opened. Romanov was standing in the doorway, Rogers just behind her.

That was when Clint remembered that he hadn't seen Phil. Hadn't seen Phil since Loki got inside his head. And Phil was always where the action was. He wouldn't have stayed behind if he could have helped it. He would have tried to stop Loki.

And hadn’t Tony been picking up some cards earlier?

And hadn’t those cards been strangely stained with some brown-red substance?

And hadn’t Tony been acting strange with them?

Clint didn’t really need Natasha and Steve to tell him. But they did.

And Clint felt his world crash in on him.

(He had been wrong earlier. This was a much, *much* worse feeling.)

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He couldn’t go home. Phil was everywhere he looked. Phil was everything. He couldn’t go there. Too many memories.

He couldn’t stay on the Helicarrier. Too many people couldn’t look at him. And those that could only sneered at him with disdain. And then there had been the “accidental” knocks that the STRIKE teams had given him.

He couldn’t go to Stark Tower. Too close to all of the action. Too many memories there.

It was dark when Clint snuck out of the Helicarrier the night after the Battle of New York. He managed to take a quinjet to the DC base. Then he made his way, quickly, to New York. He knew exactly where he was going. The one place where he would be safe. Where there were no bad memories. Where he could just be Clint.

He was basically curled up holding back his tears, because he didn't have the right to cry. Then he heard footsteps approaching. But he didn't bother to react. If someone wanted to kill him, he didn't care anymore. There was nothing to live for. He had lost *everything*!

A warm body wrapped around him. Fitting neatly into Clint's body. Arms wrapping around him in comfort.

"I guess you know." Tony's voice was nothing more than a whisper against his neck, "I wanted to be the one to tell you. So you heard it from a friend, little bro."

And didn't that just catch at Clint's heart? Because while nearly everyone else hated him, and rightfully so, here was one of the most important people in his life declaring him a friend and a brother in the same sentence.

"It's my fault." Clint murmured, "It's my fault he's dead."

"No," Tony shook his head, though Clint felt it instead of saw it, "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is." Clint returned, "I helped Loki. He got inside my head and I helped him."

"Did you want to?" Tony asked.

"Yes." Clint stated, "*Then* I did. I wanted to worship him. I wanted to serve him."

"He did something to you, didn't he?" Tony pressed.

"Tapped that stupid staff to my chest." Clint admitted, "Said I had heart."

"He was right." Tony declared softly, "You love so much and so fiercely. I thought Coulson would break your heart. But never like this… *Never* like this."

Clint froze when he felt Tony's tears caress the back of his neck. Suddenly that unlocked a gate in his brain and he started to sob. He couldn't stop. Not a single tear rolled down his face though. But he sobbed enough for the whole world.

He sobbed himself into exhaustion and sleep.

Tony was still wrapped around Clint when he woke up. For a long, long while Clint tried to figure out why that was wrong. Why Tony shouldn't be there. But his brain couldn't keep on that train of thought for long enough. Every few moments his brain reverted to Phil.

"Hey," Tony finally uncurled, "You up to having breakfast?"

Tony was stretching like a cat, clearly trying to work out the kinks in his back.

"How are you here?" Clint asked. Finally managing to figure out what the problem was with the situation.

"Jarvis told me you were." Tony shrugged, "I didn't want to leave you alone. Not after… Yeah, I thought it'd be better if you had someone here."

"But…" Clint frowned, "You left. You had a job. You left."

"I came back." Tony replied, "When I heard what was going on. My job was over. Things were a bit chaotic there. I borrowed a plane. I designed the thing, so I knew how to fly it. I came back. I was needed."

"It was *dangerous*!" Clint pointed out.

"So?" Tony shrugged, "There's a shortage of supplies. Very little safe shelter. People are being hurt. I had to do something. Once upon a time I would have thrown money at the problem, if I had done anything at all. But I'm not that man anymore. I can't be that man anymore. I have to get involved somehow. Get my hands dirty. Remind myself that I'm a better man than I used to be. So I came back. It was my choice, Clint. Please, respect that."

As much as Clint wanted to disagree, he couldn't. He wanted to wrap Tony up in cotton wool and keep him safe from the rest of the world. But Tony was determined… *So* determined to do the right thing. It was endearing.

It was also dangerous. Tony could have been hurt. In fact, looking closer, Clint could see that he *had.* There were faint bruises visible on Tony's skin. And a few cuts, that would need treatment. Fortunately nothing worse.

“You’re hurt.” Clint rolled upright.

“So are you.” Tony countered, “And I think you’re worse off. I’ll heal.”

“I’m used to it.” Clint shrugged.

“You’re used to a broken heart?” Tony raised an eyebrow, “Look, don’t worry about me. This is just a rather bad session in the lab for me. I’ve had a lot worse. Nearly gave myself a concussion once.”

“But I can help.” Clint argued.

“You want to help?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Clint nodded, “Take my mind off things. Please, Tony.”

“Sure.” Tony shrugged, “Come on. I know where you can help.”

Before Clint knew it, he was back at Stark Tower looking around at the chaos. Only it was *organised* chaos. Happy was directing teams of civilians to clear up the mess and debris. A team of medics were treating injuries and checking everyone found out.

Tony walked past them all, as if he was some sort of King. But also a genial ruler. He was asking people if they had everything they needed. He checked that the food supplies were still there. And that everyone had had a bed the night before.

Tony had opened up his Tower and welcomed everyone in. The centre of the destruction had become the symbol of hope. There was food and warmth and electricity. Clint could see several people tapping away on laptops and charging phones. He didn’t know what part they had to play in the recovery effort, but it was clear by the way they were being left alone that they did have a part. Or maybe they were on a break.

Tony bounded up several flights of stairs and entered a large room. Probably meant for conferences, but was now showing a Disney film.

“Tony!” A couple of the kids looked away from the screen and tackled him, “You came back!”

“Of course I did.” Tony smiled at them, “I told you I would.”

“But you said your friend needed you.” One older boy spoke up.

“Well, Danny,” Tony returned, “That’s why I brought him back with me.”

Clint almost flinched as several sets of eyes turned to face him.

“This is Clint.” Tony declared, “He wants to help. So I brought him here.”

Clint took a look around the room. It was filled with kids. Some injured, but all of them happy and smiling.

And it hit him like a solid weight in his chest, *this* was what he had helped save. All of these children. He had saved them.

Okay, yes, he had helped put them in danger in the first place. But it likely would have happened anyway.

But he had saved them. They were safe. They were protected. They were happily watching… What was that? “Follow Me Boys!”?

Tony set himself up in a corner with a tablet and started to work on something. Clint couldn’t see what, but he let himself relax. He had work to do.

He had children to entertain. It was a long time since he had been a circus brat. But some things you never forgot. No matter how much time passed. Or how much distance you put between it and you.

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It took another two days before things were organised enough for people to start returning home.

Somehow Tony had organised miracles, arranging for roads to be cleared, for homes to be checked for structural stability, for power and utilities to be reconnected, for accommodation to be sorted, for families to be reunited.

And all without official authorisation.

Tony was almost single-handedly repairing Manhattan. It wasn't hard for Clint to be swept up into the task. He found that the physical labour made his body ache in a good way. It kept his mind focused on something else. And no one asked him questions about who he lost or how he was coping or how he was feeling. No one ostracised him. He was welcomed with open arms. His injuries from the battle were tended to. But no one expected him to rest and recover.

When Steve and Natasha finally arrived, Clint had started to find some peace in himself. It was strange and probably more than a little silly. But that was the truth.

He couldn't change the past. He could only make peace with it. And he was finding it easier and easier each moment. Because he wasn't focused on himself and what had happened. He was focused on helping someone else.

"Clint." Natasha's voice was soft as she came up to him.

"He came back." Clint murmured, so quiet that no-one else could hear them, "He left the Helicarrier and came back."

"I know." She replied, "Fury is tearing strips out of everyone he must have gotten past."

"Good." Clint was firm, "What kept you?"

"Fury is furious." Natasha shrugged, "The nuke came from one of our planes. Off of the Helicarrier."

Clint froze in shock. It had been one of their own weapons? They had nearly been killed by one of their own weapons? Now he had an idea of how Tony had felt back in Afghanistan.

"Fury wants you back to have a meeting about everything and where we go from here." Natasha stated.

"When?" Clint sighed.

"Today or tomorrow." Natasha declared, "He wants it done before Thor takes Loki and the Tesseract back to Asgard. And before Banner disappears, or tries to, again."

"I don't think Tony will appreciate our disappearing so quickly." Clint pointed out, "Especially after it took you two days to turn up."

"Took us two days to get here." Natasha countered, "We came in the Helicarrier. An hour, two tops. Shouldn't upset Tony all that much. We just say we're going out to help."

"Well," Clint smirked, "You get to prise Tony off of Steve. Let's just say he's missed the Cap."

"It's been two days." Natasha pointed out.

"More like three." Clint countered, "And he didn't know that Steve wasn't in the Tower. He thought Loki had gotten to Steve until I told him otherwise. It didn't help that none of us were answering our phones."

Natasha nodded in concession.

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Much as Clint expected, it took a while to prise Steve away from Tony. But they were all in a conference room, sitting around a table, with Fury standing at the front.

"Why is the Man of Iron not here?" Thor asked, "He is a valiant warrior. Are his wounds so grievous that they would prevent his attendance?"

"That's not the problem." Hill muttered.

"Iron Man is a villain." The Director declared, "His identity is also unknown. We do not know how to find him."

“A villain?” Thor raised an eyebrow, “That I do doubt Nicholas of Fury. He would have given his own life for our safety. He hath not the heart of a villain.”

“His previous actions speak for themselves.” Fury snapped, “Now, with time behind them, does anyone have anything to add to what they stated in the debrief?”

There was general headshaking.

“Doctor Banner,” Fury turned to face the scientist, “You stated that you don’t know what the Hulk does. Are you sure about that?”

“I get vague images.” Banner shrugged, “Impressions. Occasionally words. But not much. Sometimes the words are things he’s heard. Sometimes its things he’s thought. Look, all I can tell you is that the other guy feels respect towards Captain America. Not enough that he’d obey every order. But enough that he’d consider the Captain’s orders. He doesn’t like Thor. But doesn’t hate him either. He’ll work alongside him if necessary. Hawkeye and the Black Widow… I don’t know. He doesn’t really feel anything I can pick up towards them. Loki, he has disdain for. For lack of a better word. Iron Man…”

“Yes?” Fury pressed.

“I don’t know.” Banner shook his head slightly, “Protectiveness? Pleasure? Care? I’ve just got the image of Iron Man in my head, with the words ‘Tin Man’ running through. He also really fixated on the glow in his chest. I don’t know why.”

“So nothing really useful,” Hawkeye could see Banner was uncomfortable with the scrutiny, “Pretty much like everything else. Look, sir, Loki’s defeated. The invasion is over. The clean-up is going really well. What does it matter right now about Iron Man? He was working *with* us.”

“It matters,” Fury returned, “Because people are starting to lay the blame for the nuke at his feet. It matters because the World Security Council want everyone to look the other way and let that stand. If I can put a face and a name to the Suit I can argue that he didn’t have the ability to obtain a nuke.”

“They would dare to impugn the honour of a valiant warrior?” Thor roared.

“When it comes to saving their backsides?” Hawkeye muttered, “Because *they* were the ones who authorised it? Hell, yeah.”

“They know nothing of battle and true honour.” Thor grumbled.

“That is often true.” Captain America agreed, “Director, if you are done with us, I, for one, would like to go home. Where my husband is currently trying to rebuild New York, while the politicians are still discussing whether we should be prosecuted for protecting them instead of pitching in to help fix what is broken.”

Fury turned and walked out the room.

"I'm guessing that's a dismissal." Banner muttered, "I need to go. I want to help."

"Try Stark Tower." Hawkeye suggested, "Tony's got a veritable army working to clear the streets. But he's short on medics."

Banner nodded in reply. Hawkeye had no doubt as to where he would go.

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He was right. When Clint, Steve and Natasha returned to the Tower, having seen Thor and Loki off, Bruce was already several patients deep in the medical area.

"Steve!" Tony launched himself at his husband, "Look! It's Doctor Banner. Brucie! I want to keep him. I'm keeping him. He's having a floor of the Tower. He's going to stay here."

Banner gave a tolerating smile, clearly expecting Steve to object to the idea. Clint was smothering an amused grin at Tony's actions. He was acting like a small child. Clearly the children were rubbing off on him.

"And so is Clint!" Tony added.

"Wait! What?" Clint blinked in shock.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?" Tony moved to pull Clint into a hug, "You don't want to go home. You don't really want to be alone either. So you're moving in. I've got a floor all ready for you anyway. It didn't even get damaged. I checked."

Tony was acting unusually clingy. Something that would normally have worried Clint. But he was certain it was due to the invasion. Tony was probably on a survivor's high, even if he hadn't been involved in any of the fighting.

“You can’t argue with me.” Tony pointed out, “You’re staying. And that’s that!”

He then launched himself off to go deal with something else.

“Steve?” Clint looked at the soldier.

“You try arguing with him.” Steve shrugged, “I’m not. He’ll make me sleep on the couch. Besides… Can you really say he’s wrong? It’s better than any alternative.”

Clint closed his eyes. They were both right. He didn’t want to be alone. And he didn’t want to go home. So he knew that he would be conceding to Tony’s wishes.

“I won’t be staying.” Banner reassured Steve, “Tony doesn’t seem to have a good sense of self-preservation. It’s not safe for me to stay in New York.”

“I don’t know, Doctor.” Steve cocked his head to one side, “Seems to me like you’d be a good friend to have around. At least I won’t have to worry about someone turning you into one of their flying monkeys. And I don’t have to worry about you getting angry, because you’re always angry.”

Banner’s eyes went wide, before his hand rose to lightly trace a star on his chest.

“I’d appreciate your discretion,” Steve stated, “My husband doesn’t know and I’d prefer that he doesn’t ever find out. He’s safer that way.”

“You’re sure?” Banner asked. Clint knew he wasn’t asking about Tony’s knowledge or lack of, but rather Steve’s decision to let him stay. To *encourage* him to stay.

“Absolutely.” Steve nodded, “You are welcome to stay for as long as you wish. You are also welcome to leave should you also wish. There is no cage here.”

“Thank you.” Banner breathed, “I won’t let harm come to him.”

“I know.” Steve smiled, “This is Clint and Natasha. I hope we can unite together.”

“Understood.” Banner agreed.

And that was that.

Chapter 25: Chapter 24

Clint didn't know where the title "Avengers" came from. But it was starting to be used by the media. He felt it was appropriate. Because they had avenged Phil.

And he had no time to feel sorry for himself or to let the guilt and grief to sneak up on him. Repair work kept him going all hours of the day.

Before he knew what had happened over two months had flown by. And he still had not had taken the time to properly grieve. He knew that the others were worried about him. But he would not allow himself time to think about it. If they banned him from repair work, he spent all his time on the archery range Tony had built for him, firing arrows until his arms felt like they were going to fall off.

Natasha had tried to talk to him. He had turned and walked away. She had followed. He had tuned her out.

Steve had tried to help with physical activity. The sparing had helped wear Clint out. But had gotten no closer to the root of the problem.

Bruce (and he was Bruce by now, not Banner) had cooked and tried to talk to him. But that hadn't helped either.

Thor (when he returned from Asgard and Tony had automatically offered his Tower as a place to stay) declared that they needed to celebrate the life of the Son of Coul and provided a great deal of alcohol to Clint and a companion to drink it with. It was quite supportive for Clint.

Rhodey, when he had returned from a *horribly* bad timed Military operation (Fury was still arguing with the Air Force about War Machine's time-share employment) had tried just sitting around near Clint when he was doing anything waiting for him to talk. Clint didn't talk.

Tony had alternately plied him with alcohol (without touching any himself, Clint noted) and curled up with him, in a vague bastardisation of a puppy-pile.

"It's okay," Tony mentioned one day, "It's okay not to let yourself feel it. But it *will* hit you. And at the worst possible time. Just warning you."

"Was it like that for you after the car crash?" Clint asked between arrows.

"No." Tony shook his head, "I got drunk that time. Sobbed it all out while virtually comatose. Think I scared about ten years off Rhodey's life expectancy. No… It was… Later."

Clint frowned slightly at Tony's words. Clearly it was still a sore and touchy subject, but he had to wonder who had died that Tony had mourned so. He could not remember any other major loss in Tony's life. Unless it was the deaths from the attack in Afghanistan.

However one morning, Tony stalked out of his lab in a furious temper. He took one look at Clint who was being plied with food by Bruce, his frown increased and he took off, barking orders at Jarvis as he did so.

"Any idea what's upset him?" Clint asked Bruce.

"Not sure." Bruce shrugged, "He's been working on something in his lab for the last two weeks. Something very private. Blacked out his windows and everything. He's been getting more and more angry though. Heard him break something yesterday."

When Tony was in his workshop, he varied access depending upon what he was working on. If it wasn't private or classified the windows into the lab from the corridor were clear. If it was classified or private they were blacked out. If it was *really* classified you couldn't communicate with Tony through the intercom and had to ask Jarvis to relay messages.

"Was he hurt?" Clint worried.

"No," Bruce shook his head, "I did ask. But he said he was fine. And I couldn't see any injuries when he emerged."

"Jarvis?" Clint looked upwards, "Can you shed any light on the situation?"

"I am afraid that Sir has ordered my silence in this matter, Master Clint." Jarvis replied, "However I can reassure you that Sir has not been injured. He is merely… Angry."

"Angry?" Bruce raised an eyebrow, "I would suggest that furious was a better description."

"I will so note that, Master Banner." Jarvis declared.

While, as expected, Jarvis had initially startled Bruce; he had quickly adapted to having the electronic butler look out for him. Tony had made things clear that for security purposes Jarvis was capable of seeing into every room. However he would not use this ability unless required by the occupants. Full recording was used on the public areas of the Tower and on the entrances to each person's floor. However in the floors themselves Jarvis only monitored body temperature to detect how many people were in a room. If someone appeared or disappeared suddenly he would be able to tell and raise the alarm. It had been a compromise between Steve and Tony, which had been extended to all private floors.

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When Tony returned, he instructed Jarvis to call all of the Tower's residents together in the common area (which wasn't really a common area, but rather the non-bedroom rooms of Tony and Steve's floor, which had somehow become everyone's favourite place to hang out).

Clint stood there confused. He had been called away from one of his spars with Steve and they had been told that they didn't have time to change or freshen up. Tony wanted them *now*.

When Tony entered the room, he was pushing a wheelchair. And in that wheelchair was an impossible sight.

Phil. His Phil. *Clint's* Phil. Alive. Not well… No, not well, because Clint could see the paleness and the clothes weren't things Phil would have chosen. But they were things Clint could imagine Tony grabbing to help Phil escape from the medics who had, no doubt, been keeping him prisoner.

As everyone rushed forward to amaze at Phil's continued existence, Clint just stood there. Frozen in a moment. Frozen in shock and slight fear. Trepidation creeping down his spine.

Would Phil blame him? Would he be angry? Would he hate Clint? Clint had betrayed him. Clint had, indirectly, caused his death.

As the group parted, Phil was looking straight at Clint. But still Clint did not move.

Clint wondered why he could feel water on his face. Tony's Tower didn't have a leak. He would never have allowed for it.

With a slightly sad, but understanding, smile, Tony helped Phil to stand. Phil crossed the short distance to where Clint stood, on unsteady feet. But without hesitation.

"I'm here." Phil said as he wrapped Clint in a hug, "I'm here. You're here. You came back to me. You're safe. You're alright."

Clint's arms rose to grab the back of Phil's top and he tucked his head into the crook of Phil's neck.

He started to feel his body shaking with sobs. He tried to reign them back in. But he couldn't.

Phil managed to guide them down to the floor. They were curled up in a small ball, just the two of them.

The only sounds audible were Clint's sobs and Phil's reassuring murmurs.

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It might have been hours later, it might only have been minutes, when Clint was sufficiently in control of himself to emerge from Phil's comforting grasp.

"How?" Clint whispered.

"I don't really know." Phil replied, "It's a bit of a blur. I only came around last week. And they wouldn't let me go. I was trying to come back to you. I promise you that. I was *trying*!"

"I know." Clint stated, "I know you were. You wouldn't leave me behind. Not if you could help it."

"I don't know how Tony found me."

"I think he was looking." Clint shrugged, "He's been in his lab for two weeks according to Bruce."

"Bruce?" Phil raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"We've kinda all moved in here." Clint admitted, "I didn't want to go home. It wasn't home without you. I'd say Tony didn't give me much of a choice about it, but I wasn't really fighting him."

"Good," Phil declared, "I wanted you looked after. And Tony would do that… You know he was singing the Mission Impossible theme tune as he broke me out?"

That caused Clint to laugh. The first laugh he had managed in what felt like a long time. Then he couldn't stop laughing. It quickly turned hysterical.

Phil just pulled him closer.

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Clint eventually got the full story after Phil dragged him back home to collect some of their stuff. Much of the tale he'd heard from Natasha and Steve before. Phil didn't know how he'd survived precisely, but laid most of the credit towards Fury's quick summoning of the medical team.

Although the discussion about moving into the Tower was long, it was almost a foregone conclusion. While they both still wanted to keep their house, it made sense to move in to the Tower.

Fury marched into the Tower, not long after that. He was clearly intent on reaming Tony out for his actions.

"Stark!" He snarled.

Up in the vents, Clint froze watching the scene below.

"Fury," Tony smirked, "Missing something?"

"You hacked our systems."

"Can you prove it?" Tony retorted smugly.

"I don't need to. You couldn't have known about Coulson otherwise."

"Really?" Tony raised an eyebrow, "And what right did you have to tell us that he was dead? His family didn't deserve that. They *mourned* him, Nick! They mourned him. Did they deserve that? Two months of believing that he was dead. That was cruel."

"I didn't know that he would survive. There was a chance that he wouldn't. So I decided not to put them through that hell. The hell of watching him die."

"Instead you put them through the hell of mourning a man not yet dead. Don't try arguing with me about this, Nicholas. I'm not on your side. Just be grateful that I'm still willing to sort out your engine repairs and everything else you've been after recently. Now, leave. Before I call in security."

Fury swept out the room. He knew he had lost the argument, Clint could tell. And to be honest, Clint wasn't all that unhappy about it. Fury had admitted to Coulson that his death had been used as a motivator to keep Natasha and Steve on track. As well as to guilt Thor into helping, although there had been no need to lie to Thor. He had seen what he had seen and believed it.

Tony seemed quite surprised that Fury had given in so quickly. But Clint knew that Fury had really only gone through with the confrontation because he couldn't show weakness to Tony or ignorance of what he had done. Fury tended to treat Tony as a cross between a technological genius and a naughty puppy who had a tendency to tear up the furnishings if left alone.

Clint was sure that wasn't quite the right tactic, but couldn't think of anything better for someone in Fury's position.

Anyway Fury had done it, because he had to. He would have put up a far better fight, had he not having been dealing with a bank robbery as well.

Normally a bank robbery wouldn't even flash up on SHIELD's radar, unless it involved super-powers or supervillains or ridiculous amounts of money. And this one had involved none of those.

However it was a bank where a good number of high ranking SHIELD Agents kept safety deposit boxes. And where Alexander Pierce, of the World Security Council, also kept several safety deposit boxes.

According to their owners all the safety deposit boxes were untouched. But there was still the question of what the robber or robbers had been after.

After all, who breaks into a bank and steals nothing?

Clint was just glad that he didn't have to deal with that investigation. Investigations of that nature weren't in his area of expertise.

However that wasn't his problem right then, he could see Tony shaking slightly. Nerves or tension, Clint guessed.

"Clint?" Tony addressed the ceiling, "You up there?"

“Yeah,” Clint confirmed, sliding out, “You okay?”

“I really don’t like him.” Tony muttered, “I really, *really* don’t like him. Hey, why do you go in the vents anyway?”

“Hang over,” Clint shrugged, “From the circus. I like being high up, and where no-one can see me. I use it a lot for work, so it’s sorta become a habit.”

“Cool.” Tony replied, “Sorry you had to hear that.”

“It’s okay.” Clint stated, “You didn’t invite him.”

“No,” Tony agreed, “Look, I hate to dash on you after that, but I’ve got a meeting.”

“Sure thing.” Clint grinned.

That was the thing Clint was finding the strangest about Tony, now that he was a CEO officially. He would make a concerted effort to get to all his meetings. Though Clint knew that he didn’t make it to all the meetings, Pepper made enough complaints about that. Fortunately Tony had taken the initiative to give Pepper enough authority that she could effectively run the business without his input, should it be needed, as his Vice-CEO. It wasn’t necessary for him to attend all the meetings, it was simply preferred.

Clint knew that it was easy for Tony to get distracted. He got ideas or inspiration and would run off to see just how far he could take it.

Clint liked that about Tony. The way he was so naïve and innocent. So enthusiastic for an idea.

And Clint, like all of the Avengers, wanted to keep him that way.

Chapter 26: Chapter 25

“Barton.” Clint answered his phone.

“Clint? It’s Sam.” Sam declared, “They took him.”

“Who?” Clint blinked in shock, “Who took who?”

“I don’t know!” Sam snapped, “But they took Tony!”

“What?!” Clint jerked upright, “When? How? How many?”

“I don’t know!” Sam retorted, “They clonked me one on the head. Only just came round. Tony programed your number into my phone a while back. Just in case.”

“How many of them?”

“I saw four. But there could have been more. I tried to stop them.”

“I know you would have.” Barton declared, “Don’t worry. I know who to call. Get yourself checked out. Leave it to me.”

Hawkeye hung up. Immediately he pressed an alert button on his phone. He was *not* going to let anything happen to Tony.

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It didn’t take long for the Avengers to form up and suit up. Even though they had to avoid Jarvis’ watching eyes.

Soon they were all in a quinjet, desperately looking for Tony.

“I have some footage from the centre in DC.” Agent Coulson declared.

“I thought Sam declined cameras in there.” War Machine frowned.

“He did.” The Black Widow smirked, “Didn’t stop us.”

“What does it show?” Captain America pressed.

“Six men,” Agent Coulson replied, “Look to be members of AIM.”

“Advanced Ideas Mechanics.” Hawkeye expanded the acronym.

“What would such people want with Anthony of Stark?” Thor asked.

“Most likely?” Agent Coulson sighed, “They want him to build something. Probably a weapon.”

“And if he does not comply?” Thor queried.

“They’ll torture him.” War Machine breathed, “He barely survived last time.”

“They have hurt him before?” Thor demanded, “They have no honour.”

“Not AIM,” The Black Widow countered, “The Ten Rings. That time he fought free. Killed everyone there.”

“Anthony of Stark?” Thor blinked, “He is a warrior?”

“No,” Hawkeye shook his head, “He was just desperate.”

“He used his brain,” Captain America explained, “Told them he would build his weapon. Then he built a weapon to kill them all.”

“He has heart.” Thor declared firmly.

Hawkeye supressed a shudder. It was too similar to what Loki had said.

“That’s sort of the main problem.” War Machine stated.

“If they pull it out,” Bruce put in, “I don’t know how long he’ll have. And nor does he.”

“Can you trace them?” Captain America questioned.

“We managed for a while.” Agent Coulson replied, “However we lost them.”

“Is there any way to track them?” Hawkeye asked.

“There might be.” Bruce frowned, “The Arc Reactor.”

“What of it?” The Black Widow pressed, “It’s an energy source.”

“Exactly.” War Machine pointed at Bruce, “I see where you’re going… Trace the energy signature.”

“We’d need an exemplar.” Bruce admitted.

“Easy enough.” War Machine shrugged, “That’s what the suit runs on.”

“Really?” Hawkeye blinked, “Didn’t expect that.”

“Tony said that the original miniature could run his heart for fifty lifetimes,” War Machine stated, “Or something big for fifteen minutes. His better ones… Well, I haven’t fully found its limit.”

“It’s a start.” Bruce declared firmly, “I’ll need some time though. This is more Tony’s area than mine. But I *think* I can adapt what we used to try and track the Tesseract to track the Arc Reactor. We were nearly finished.”

“What do you need?” Agent Coulson asked.

“Most importantly time.” Bruce sighed, “I’m sorry. I’ll work as fast as I can. But it will take time.”

“I’ll help.” War Machine stated, “After Tony and Jarvis I know the most about the Arc Reactor. I’m not as good as Tony when it comes to engineering, but I know how the man thinks… To a certain degree.”

123456789

Hawkeye didn’t like waiting. At least not waiting to deploy. Waiting in the field was different, it was observation.

But this? This was torture. And who knew what sort of torture Tony was going through while Bruce and War Machine tried to figure out a way to track Tony.

“No. No. No!” Colonel Rhodes shouted at one point.

“If we narrow the detection field, we reduce the chance of interference.” Bruce pointed out, “We eliminate false positives.”

“Yes,” Colonel Rhodes retorted, “But this isn’t the same as Tony’s Arc Reactor. Mine runs off of Paladium. Tony’s runs off of a variation of Vibranium.”

“Vibranium?” Captain America blinked, “Howard made my shield out of that. Said it was all of it they had.”

“Yeah, well,” Colonel Rhodes shrugged, “We managed to create a variation of it in a lab. I don’t have a sample of it. I know that it gives out a similar frequency as mine. But not the same. Tony commented that it tasted of coconut and metal.”

“How does that help us?” The Black Widow asked.

“It doesn’t.” Bruce declared, “But Rhodey is right. I can’t narrow the detection field to only take into account what his Arc Reactor puts out. That means this is going to be a lot more hit and miss.”

“We don’t have the time for misses.” Captain America pointed out.

“We don’t have time *period*.” Hawkeye countered, “We don’t have any way of replicating the element Tony’s using, right?”

“Not without a *lot* more time.” Colonel Rhodes agreed.

“Then I say we take a hit and miss approach.” Hawkeye stated, “We can clear each place that comes up on the scan.”

“Agreed.” Agent Coulson nodded, “That is the best way.”

“Then these are the locations we have.” Bruce spun the screen to show everyone.

“Let’s get moving.” Captain America declared.

“Aye,” Thor agreed, “The cowardly knaves who would hurt one who is not a warrior need to learn to fear our wrath.”

123456789

Hawkeye couldn’t help the tension that was visible to anyone that knew him well. The first few locations they could eliminate easily as being known locations of Arc Reactors. But the other locations had to be checked out individually.

Every moment that was spent checking out a dead end was one more moment that Tony spent being tortured.

Already twenty four hours on and they still hadn’t found Tony.

This was the fourth site they were checking. The last three had had miniature Arc Reactors there. By War Machine's reckoning far, far cruder than anything Tony had ever created. Even counting the one he'd made in Afghanistan.

"You sure we're in the right place?" Captain America asked, as he looked around the barren landscape.

"This is where the frequency is coming from." War Machine frowned, "I don't understand it. It's faint though."

"Could it be buried?" Hawkeye questioned, "Or in the cliff?"

"No." Bruce shook his head, "It's moving. And it's higher up."

"We have suspected for some time that AIM had access to a flying fortress of some type." Agent Coulson remarked, "Invisible. Much like the Helicarrier."

"I'll meet you up there." War Machine declared, moments before he engaged his repulsors.

Up in the sky, Hawkeye was looking around trying to find anything that could be an invisible plane. The problem was that invisible planes were by their very nature invisible and therefore couldn't be spotted.

Suddenly a memory ran through Hawkeye's mind. From one of Tony's movie nights.

He stopped looking for a plane. And started to look for the distortion caused by the invisibility.

"War Machine," Hawkeye snapped, "On your four. My eleven. Up about another two miles I think. Reckon that's it."

"Roger." War Machine replied.

"Everyone get ready to disembark." Hawkeye fired at the others, "Agent Coulson, will you be able to take over the helm?"

"Affirmative." Agent Coulson nodded.

He quickly slipped into the co-pilot's seat. Hawkeye moved to the door, along with the rest of the Avengers.

"Bruce," Captain America looked at the scientist, "We don't know what state Tony will be in. We might need you more than the Hulk."

"I know." Bruce agreed, "But I don't think he'd ever hurt Tony. I might be able to get him to step back when we need him to."

Rising up above the visual distortion, a vessel came into view. It appeared that the illusion of invisibility was only covering the bottom half of the flying fortress.

Captain America was the first out the door, with Thor only a heartbeat behind him. Bruce moved next and it was the Hulk who landed. Hawkeye and the Black Widow landed rolling as they rose to standing.

It only took a moment for the guards to flood out. Then there was nothing but the fight.

They worked as one unit. Hawkeye knew they could easily tear through the entire vessel in a matter of moments. But that would run the risk of harming Tony.

Until they could be certain of Tony's location they couldn't damage any part of the vehicle.

Fighting off a bunch of AIM lunatics, Hawkeye took an energy blast to the shoulder. It caused him to tumble backwards and off the fortress.

War Machine was too far away to sweep down and rescue him immediately. Hawkeye knew he stood very little chance of surviving the fall. And his only hope was that War Machine was faster than his fall.

"Easy there, brother." Hawkeye heard the words before he fully registered the grip on the back of his vest.

He was no longer falling, instead he was rising, back up to where the fighting was.

Looking upwards, he saw a black man with metal wings above him. The face was partially covered by a pair of goggles. However Hawkeye knew it somehow. He just couldn't place it.

"I'm guessing you're not with AIM." Hawkeye remarked.

"No fear there." The man replied, "Can I count on you to watch my back?"

"What's your goal?" Hawkeye asked.

"They took a friend." The man stated, "I'm getting him back."

Very few details, but Hawkeye could tell the words had feeling behind them. The man was being honest, if illusive about his motives.

With the help of the bird-man's fast and manoeuvrable flight (more manoeuvrable than War Machine, Hawkeye privately admitted) the pair of them managed to circle underneath the fortress and found an open door. The entrance was small, too small for War Machine to use. And it was badly positioned for anyone to use War Machine to get to it.

But with bird-man it was easier, if not easy. Add in the fact that Hawkeye still had a lot of his muscle memory from his circus days, he managed to get in through the door.

He was slightly worried about bird-man's wingspan. However the bird-man simply flew at the entrance and folded up his wings at the last moment, tumbling into a controlled roll, rising to his feet at the end.

And there was the main difference between him and War Machine. War Machine's armour was a weapon and transport. It was a tool. Which War Machine wielded very well, but… It was a tool and always had been.

The bird-man's wings… They were part of him. An extension of his body. Much like Iron Man's armour.

There was no momentary pause between thought and action. No need to think about which switch or lever or *whatever* controlled it. It just happened.

"Let's go." Bird-man snapped.

"What should I call you?" Hawkeye asked as they cautiously made their way through the corridor.

"Falcon." Bird-man supplied quickly.

"Hawkeye." Hawkeye introduced himself.

Then there were AIM soldiers in front of them and no time to talk. The fight was more on AIM's terms in the close quarters. Especially as neither Hawkeye nor Falcon could make use of their distance capabilities.

However they were the more capable fighters. Better trained and although they had never worked together before that training allowed them to synchronise their fighting, covering each other as necessary.

Between them they managed to clear a path and reach what seemed to be a cell block area. Falcon's collapsible machine guns made short work of the locks, so Hawkeye moved forward quickly scanning each cell.

"Tony!" Hawkeye breathed as he spotted his friend.

The door to the cell wasn't even locked. But then again, it wasn't as if Tony was in a fit state to try and escape.

The billionaire was hanging by his arms from the ceiling. Manacles clasped firmly around his wrists. His head hung loosely, though there was a twitch as Hawkeye opened the door, as if

he was trying to lift it up. Tony's feet dangled, unable to reach the floor. He was shivering slightly, even Hawkeye, through his layers, could feel the chill in the air, and Tony had been stripped of everything apart from his boxers.

Hawkeye moved forward. Lifting Tony's head a little, he placed his hand on the carotid artery.

"Hawkeye to all points," He spoke clearly, "I have Stark. I repeat, I have Stark. His pulse is thready. But I can't see any physical injuries yet."

"Good." Captain America returned over the earpiece, "Stay with him."

"Ain't going anywhere, Cap." Hawkeye almost laughed.

As Hawkeye started to lift Tony to lay him down on the floor, Falcon stepped forward to help.

"Hey, Tony." Falcon laid a gentle hand on Tony's cheek, "You with me, man?"

"You came for him?" Hawkeye blinked in surprise.

"He's my friend." Falcon replied, with just a touch of venom, "I can understand that if to you he's just a pay check. But he's a good man."

Hawkeye blinked in shock. He wasn't expecting such protectiveness from the man.

"Come on, Tones." Falcon turned his attention to the man on the floor, "Wake up. Come on. Open those pretty eyes of yours for me."

Something in Falcon's voice must have gotten through, because there was a definite attempt by Tony to open his eyes; even if it was unsuccessful. Hawkeye pulled a small flashlight out of his pockets and pried open one eye. It was clear and easy to see that the pupil was blown. Virtually nothing could be seen of the Iris. Not even when he flashed the light over it.

“Drugged.” Hawkeye muttered, “Hey, wakey, wakey. Come on. Show me some life there.”

A gentle series of taps on Tony’s cheek got a reaction along with the words.

“Wha?” Tony slurred, “Two. Jus wanned… Clint… Phil… Where… Buried… Funeral… Haveta know… Lookin… Jus…”

“Easy, easy, Tones.” Falcon ran his hand through Tony’s hair, “I’ve got you.”

“We’ve got you.” Hawkeye added.

“Does anything hurt?” Falcon pressed, “Where is the pain?”

“Been worse.” Tony managed to get out, “Pain… Can cope… Stark men… Made of Iron.”

“Hey,” Falcon got in Tony’s face as much as he could, “You don’t have to be Stark. Not for me. Just be Tones. Where does it hurt?”

But Tony had lost even the tentative grip he had had on consciousness.

“I hope one of your lot is medic trained.” Falcon declared, “Because I only know the very basics.”

Instead Falcon turned to the manacles and worked on removing them. He then produced bandages and covered up the torn up wrists.

“He struggled.” Hawkeye noted.

“He would.” Falcon shrugged, “It’s not in his nature to just lie down.”

Any further conversation was cut off by the sound of battle approaching them. Falcon positioned himself between the door and Tony, wings spread to provide a shield for Tony’s still form, both machine guns primed and ready to fire. Hawkeye had his bow drawn and was aiming over Falcon’s wings.

However neither of them were fully ready for what happened. The Hulk tore his way in to the room. A loud roar caused Falcon to instinctively flinch backwards, revealing Tony, just for a moment.

But it was enough, the Hulk hauled on a wing, pulling Falcon away from Tony. Hawkeye was torn between firing and not. Between hurting a teammate he had successfully fought alongside before and not protecting a friend from what could be a vicious monster.

However the decision was quickly taken from him. The Hulk knelt down next to Tony. He ran a gentle, giant hand over Tony's face, before tapping gently on the Arc Reactor.

"Shiny Heart." The Hulk growled, "Shiny Heart. Hulk keep safe."

He cradled Tony to his chest as if the genius were a babe in arms. He even rubbed his nose into Tony's hair as if scenting the man.

"Hey there big guy," Hawkeye stepped forward slowly, his hands empty, "Tony needs help."

"Hulk keep Shiny Heart safe." Hulk declared.

"That's great, big guy." Hawkeye tried again, "But Tony really needs Bruce right about now. He's injured. We need Bruce to treat him. To tell us what to do."

"Hulk know what to do!" Hulk snarled, "Hulk keep Shiny Heart safe!"

Without further discussion Hulk charged out of the cell and didn't stop. Hawkeye watched as the Hulk just tore through the walls.

"Tone!" Falcon yelped, clearly worried.

"The big guy won't hurt him." Hawkeye reassured.

"That maybe." Falcon shrugged, "But he's certainly not helping. Tony needs medical attention."

“Yeah, well you try stopping him when he’s got an idea in his head,” Hawkeye snapped, “This is Hawkeye to all points, Hulk just went out of here. Anyone got eyes on him? He’s got Tony.”

“What?” War Machine demanded, “Didn’t you stop him?”

“It’s the *Hulk*!” Hawkeye snapped, “He was going on about protecting ‘Shiny Heart’. I’m just a squishy human.”

Falcon looked at the path the Hulk had travelled.

“I’m going after him.” Falcon declared, “You round up your boy band and catch us up.”

And the Falcon set off, running through the destruction trail that the Hulk had left behind. Hawkeye watched as the Falcon deployed his wings taking off after the Hulk.

“Do not fire on the Bird-Man.” Hawkeye instructed, “Do not fire on the wings. He’s called Falcon and seems to be protecting Tony.”

“Understood,” Captain America agreed, “Thor, War Machine, follow Hulk. If you can separate him from Tony. But *don’t* allow any harm to come to Tony if you can help it. The rest of us will finish up here.”

“Roger.” War Machine confirmed.

“Aye, Captain.” Thor agreed.

Hawkeye quickly cleared his route back up to the deck. He met up with the other Avengers still on the flying fortress.

Together they fought their way through to the helm. After five minutes of staring and poking at the controls the Black Widow decided the best thing to do was just empty her pistols into the consol.

It worked, crashing the large vehicle into the ground. The area around them was abandoned, so there was no harm there. And there were no innocents on board. Anyone involved with AIM was automatically a terrorist. And Hawkeye had checked for further prisoners without any coming to light.

Agent Coulson brought the quinjet down to ground level and they quickly boarded. Hawkeye quickly retaking his preferred place in the cockpit.

"Thor, War Machine," Captain America spoke firmly, "Have you managed to catch up with Hulk yet?"

"Verily," Thor declared, "Though it seems that our erstwhile shield brother will not halt."

"I can see Tony." War Machine added, "He doesn't look all that good. But I'm not carrying any Hulk-Buster technology. And anything else might hurt Tony."

"Aye," Thor agreed, "I dare not attack for the same reason."

"Agent Coulson, Hawkeye," Captain America turned to face the pilots, "Catch up. I might be able to give Hulk orders to stand down."

"Are you sure that's wise?" The Black Widow asked, "He might take it as a threat."

"It's the best option we've got right now." Captain America pointed out, "I doubt Tony can last much longer without medical treatment. Not from what you were saying, Hawkeye."

"He was conscious at one point." Hawkeye tried to reassure, "Not coherent. But I think he was just responding to the last question he had been asked by them. You know when you just keep repeating the same information over and over again? I think he was doing that. Just answering what they had asked him before."

"They tortured him." The Black Widow wasn't asking the question.

"I hope it was more drugs and fear than anything else." Hawkeye shrugged, "I didn't see any signs of violence on him. But there's a lot you can do without leaving marks."

"I know." Captain America slammed a hand into the wall, "I should have been there. I should have found him quicker."

"Do not blame yourself," The Black Widow instructed, "We did not see this coming. There was no hint that they would try something like this."

"There should have been." Captain America pointed out, "This was not spur of the moment. This was planned. This was co-ordinated. They knew *exactly* when he would be at

his most vulnerable. In a place they could scout out weeks in advance and watch his usual routine. We all *know* he goes to Sam every week. Always goes alone. He was vulnerable. We should have realized. We should have been better prepared."

"Hindsight," Hawkeye stated, "Is always twenty-twenty, Cap. Don't go there. Don't play the 'What If' game. It'll only destroy you from the inside out. Tony's going to need you. He's going to need you to be strong."

"He'll need you too." The Black Widow added, "So you can't play that game either. And don't say you aren't. I can see it."

Hawkeye huffed a breath out almost indignantly. But he knew she was right. His mind had been going down that path. It was a well-worn and comfortable path beneath the feet of his mind. It was hard for him to wrench himself away from the pattern of self-blame. But for the sake of Tony he would have to do so. Guilt and blame did not help recovery. A fact that he knew far too well.

"On your left, Captain." Agent Coulson instructed.

"Hulk!" The Soldier yelled out of the quinjet, holding onto the internal structure to prevent himself from falling, "Stop! Put Tony down! We can use the quinjet to get him to a doctor. To get him help."

Hawkeye was slightly impressed by the amount of distance that the Hulk had managed to travel, despite clearly not wanting Tony to be harmed. The jumps had not been the mammoth thuds that the Hulk was capable of. The creature was clearly going at a slightly slower and safer pace, in order to protect Tony from harm from the very rescue the Hulk was providing.

However it seemed that the Captain's words had managed to reach the Hulk, where Thor's poetry and War Machine's demands had failed. The Hulk slowed and then stopped, still cradling Tony like a small child.

Though the problem was still not fully resolved. The Hulk refused to hand Tony over to War Machine or Thor. It was only after the quinjet had landed and Captain America had emerged that the Hulk was willing to surrender his unconscious passenger.

"Star Man keep Shiny Heart safe." Hulk declared as he gently passed Tony to the soldier.

“I will.” Captain America nodded in reply as he sank to the ground cradling his husband.

Even as Captain America laid Tony down to assess him, the Hulk knelt, shuddered and shifted back to Bruce. Though he was wavering and on the verge of passing out. Hawkeye moved to prop the man upright.

“Pulse thready.” Captain America confirmed what Hawkeye had discovered earlier, “But still present. Breathing is shallow. And he has a slight rattle in it. He’s shivering. But I don’t think it’s from the chill. He’s sweaty. He’s obviously distressed. But I can’t feel any broken bones. It’s most likely safe to move him. Though that point would probably be moot by now anyway. After the Hulk’s moved him a couple of hundred miles. I can see a few injection sites. But I think he’ll be alright.”

“Then we’ll take him to the Helicarrier.” Agent Coulson declared, “I’ve called in the AIM crash site. Agents will be there momentarily. We’ll get Stark to medical. Run a full blood work-up and stick him through a few pieces of medical equipment. Just to make sure.”

The Captain rose to his feet, cradling Tony in his arms. He even arranged the man, so that he could listen to the Captain’s heartbeat as they moved. Hawkeye hefted Bruce to his feet as they moved towards the quinjet.

“You also, Falcon.” Agent Coulson instructed, “We will need a debrief from yourself.”

“As soon as I know Tony is going to be alright.” Falcon conceded, “Not like I expected this to end any other way, once I saw you lot out here.”

It was fortunate that the quinjet was large enough for all of them to fit. Otherwise there wouldn’t have been room for Falcon to fit inside as well. And while War Machine often preferred to fly alongside the plane, this time he wanted to be where he could keep an eye on Tony.

Not that he could really keep a close eye on Tony, because Captain America wasn’t putting the injured industrialist down. Or releasing his grip, at all. Agent Coulson had merely shrugged at the insistence and handed over a space blanket to try and keep what warmth Tony had left preserved.

Chapter 27: Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take all that long, comparatively speaking to get Tony into the care of the medics of SHIELD. Though they seemed more excited than panicked to get Tony into their care. Hawkeye made a note to keep an eye on them and possibly go through what he could access of their files later to delete anything he deemed inappropriate. He still vividly remembered the medical they made him go through after the Battle of New York, two and a half months had not dulled his memory of that at all. He would swear that they had taken half his blood during that "check-up".

"So who are you?" War Machine asked as the Avengers plus Falcon sat around waiting for information about Tony's condition, "I mean, you obviously care for Tony."

"I'll say." Hawkeye put in, "He put himself between the Hulk and Tony. It's a miracle he only came out of it with bruises."

"But then again," The Black Widow smirked, "You're quite fond of our Tony, aren't you? Sam Wilson."

"How did you know?" Falcon removed his goggles and the familiar visage explained why Hawkeye had been racking his brain for quite a while to place the face, "Virtually *nobody* knows my connection to Tony. He's worked really hard keeping it that way."

A quick glance around the room and there was a chorus of shrugs.

War Machine deployed his faceplate release first, revealing Rhodey. Then like a wave, they all pulled cowls or masks off.

"I guess this explains a lot." Sam blinked, "Especially why Tony told me to call you, Clint."

"Tony doesn't know." Steve shook his head, "We agreed it was safer that way."

"Safer?" Sam stared, "For who?"

"Him." Clint declared, "He doesn't react any differently to us. He doesn't say anything that could be taken as knowing more than he should. People can't connect him to

the Avengers."

"And if they can't connect him," Bruce put in, "They won't take him to use against us."

"That worked real well today." Sam pointed out.

"They weren't trying to target us." Natasha countered, "They were after Tony for Tony. If they were after us they would have sent a ransom message."

"Indeed," Thor stated, "Such cowardly knaves would not have waited to laud their advantage over us."

"Besides," Rhodey shrugged, "Tony knows who I am. He built the Suit for me. And only for me. He knows Bruce and Thor. Who are kinda hard to miss."

"Not really," Sam shook his head, "Everyone knows that Tony's a soft squishy human. No one would allow an Asgardian God or the Hulk to live with him. It'd be too dangerous. And despite what happened to him, or maybe *because* of it, people tend to believe that Tony's wrapped up in cotton wool and bubble wrap and protected from everything. So your presence there… It's like someone's slapped a SEP field over all of you."

"SEP field?" Thor frowned in confusion.

"Somebody Else's Problem." Clint, Bruce, Rhodey and Steve chorused.

"I do not understand." Thor was surprised at the immediate response.

"If something is strange enough or weird enough or freaky enough or horrible enough people just ignore it." Clint explained, "They just slap a great big mental label on it and say it's up to someone else to sort it out."

"Tony Stark is a squishy, irreverent, aggravating human." Bruce carried on, "There is no way that he could live with the Hulk. Because the Hulk would have lost his temper and killed him already. And no-one would let Thor live with Tony Stark because Tony Stark is not a good example of humankind."

"Anthony of Stark is a Migardian Seidhr." Thor protested, "He is a fine example of your kind."

"Not everyone sees it that way, Thor." Rhodey shrugged, "Most people won't even link me with Tony. Even though my identity isn't exactly a well-kept secret. Too many people see his past indiscretions. And fail to notice just how successful his business has been."

"Or just how many inventions he is solely responsible for." Sam put in, "Though he has changed significantly from how he was."

"How did you manage to find him?" Steve frowned, "Or follow us. Those wings of yours… They're not exactly easy to get hold of, I would imagine."

“No,” Sam shrugged, “But they’re kept not too far from the centre. And quite a few people are willing to look the other way for a Vet. Especially soldiers. And especially soldiers guarding defunct and decommissioned equipment. They reckoned it couldn’t do any harm. It wasn’t in the classified or secure section. Just something for the trash pile.”

“But knowing how to use them,” Clint pressed, “That’s not usual equipment. That’s something you’d need specialist training for.”

“I know.” Sam smirked.

“I thought you said you were a pilot.” Steve accused.

“I never said I was a pilot.” Sam returned.

“We just assumed.” Natasha sighed, “And we were wrong.”

“Look,” Steve came to what seemed to be a quick decision, but Clint knew most likely wasn’t, “We could use you. We need additional Air Support. Would you be willing to sign up?”

“We definitely need extra Air Support.” Clint agreed, “Especially considering that Rhodey here is only part time.”

“You knew that when you allowed Tony to set his choice of pilot.” Rhodey defended himself, “You have only Fury to blame. Clearly his negotiation skills need work.”

“Clearly.” Bruce laughed, “Considering he let Tony put that clause in the contract.”

“We would be most honoured to fight alongside you today, Sam of Wilson,” Thor boomed, “Would you not join with us to fight regularly?”

“Give me time to think about it?” Sam asked, “This is a bit of a big step.”

“Sure,” Steve nodded, “But how did you find Tony?”

“With this.” Sam pulled out a phone from his pockets, “They dropped this when they grabbed Tony. There’s a tracking app to locate their base. Or at least the one we found today.”

“Why didn’t you say?” Clint breathed, “That would have made things so much *easier*!”

“Because I didn’t find it until after I called you.” Sam replied, “And Tony made me promise… If anything happened to him I was to call Jarvis. Then you. And then I was not to call anyone else. At all. Not even to call you again. He’s been getting more paranoid since the Battle of New York. I think it affected him more than he’s letting on.”

“I presume the phone was locked?” Phil pointed out as he took it from Sam.

“Yes,” Sam shrugged, “But Tony taught me how to unlock phones. He said nothing was ever locked. Not if you had the key. Most phones have a hidden code that allows you to

override the password. It's easy enough to remove, but as a lot of people don't know about it, they never do."

"So you hacked the phone, stole some military equipment and went after Tony?" Natasha accused.

"Yes." Sam nodded, "It sounds bad when you put it like that. But I just wanted him looked after. I know *exactly* how badly Afghanistan messed him up. I didn't want him to go back to that person again. He's just about holding himself together with sticking plaster and glue."

Suddenly Steve cocked his head to one side, and seemed to be listening to something. Then he was up and off and running towards one of the medical bays. The others took off after him.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Steve snarled as he burst through the doors.

The medics froze in fear and shock as they stared at the furious man. Tony's heart-rate monitor was screaming to the heavens about its displeasure at Tony's status. Clint clicked out his bow and drew it upon realizing that one of the medics was holding the Arc Reactor in his hands.

(And it was *far* larger than he had ever imagined even with the knowledge he had gained previously.)

"You dare steal Anthony of Stark's heart?!" Thor readied his hammer.

"I'll take that." Bruce pulled the Arc Reactor out of unresisting fingers, "Tasha, I'll need your hands."

"Why?" Natasha blinked.

"Our hands aren't small enough." Rhodey had ditched the gauntlets and moved to Tony's side, "Yours are. Let me just clean it out first."

"Is that pus?" Natasha asked clinically.

"Inorganic plasma discharge." Bruce and Rhodey corrected together.

“Produced by the device not Tony.” Rhodey clarified, “He rarely needs to clear it out. But it does require some maintenance.”

“However he *never* just pulls it out of his chest.” Bruce snapped at the medics, “He sorts it out, without risking anything.”

“Okay, Tasha,” Rhodey returned his attention to Tony, “You just need to plug him in. Think of it like a game of operation. Don’t let it touch the sides.”

“How do you know all this?” Phil questioned Bruce.

“Tony told me.” Bruce shrugged, “Just in case it was ever needed. He said he trusted me to know when it would be needed and when it wasn’t. He also said he didn’t want to put that pressure on Steve. Thought it wasn’t fair.”

Rhodey and Natasha managed to plug the Arc Reactor back in. The whole room relaxed as Tony’s heart-rate monitor returned to a normal heart beat.

“That’s *it*!” Steve snarled, “I’m taking Tony home. Where he is safe and he is not going to be someone’s Science Project. Bruce can look after him.”

“Give me two minutes.” Bruce turned green-laced eyes on him, “I want to make sure he’s stable enough to move. Fortunately he wasn’t awake to be aware of what just happened.”

“That would have been bad.” Sam agreed.

It only took an hour after that for Phil to organise the relocation from the Helicarrier to Stark Tower. During that time Tony had never come around from the sedative that was in his system.

“What did they pump him full of?” Clint murmured to Bruce at one point.

“From what I can tell from these notes,” Bruce held up the notes he’d appropriated (read: stolen), “Something to make him talk.”

“A truth serum.” Clint breathed in shock.

“No,” Bruce shook his head, “They don’t actually exist. All those drugs do is mess with your higher brain function. They can make you talk. And they can make it harder for you to lie. But they can’t make you tell the truth. If you already have a story fixed in your mind to tell. They can’t tell if that is the truth or a lie. Though they are more inclined to believe it. Even if it’s a lie.”

“Because they believe you *can't* lie.” Clint stored that rather useful titbit of information away in his memory for later reference.

“Exactly.” Bruce agreed, “It’s more fear and intimidation than anything else. Apart from the drug, they most likely also water-boarded him. SHIELD found water in his lungs.”

“Bastards.” Clint muttered.

“But I don’t know if he’ll remember any of it.” Bruce added, “Some of these sort of drugs can really mess up your memory.”

“Until he says otherwise,” Clint countered, “I’m going to assume he remembers everything and be grateful that someone built a voice distorter into our uniforms.”

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It wasn’t really surprising to anybody in the Avengers that Tony, as soon as he recovered sufficiently, retreated to his workshop. In fact it was simply taken as situation normal and generally ignored. Steve simply made regular trips down and placed food outside the lab.

Tony had done pretty much the same thing after the chaos from the Battle of New York had died down a bit and he wasn’t needed to be permanently on call. It was generally assumed that Tony was just working on new projects to get his mind off what had just happened. Good, old fashioned distraction therapy in other words.

Agent Coulson performed a quick debrief and managed to identify the fact that Tony didn’t remember pretty much anything. The drugs used had really played havoc with his memory. About the only things Tony remembered were the emotions of fear and panic, the sensation of cold and indistinct voices shouting questions. But he couldn’t remember the questions, only that they *were* questions.

Meanwhile Sam agreed to join the Avengers and moved into the Tower. It turned out that Tony had a standing invitation for the man to join the little family that was forming around him.

Pepper kept Steve in the loop on new inventions that Tony churned out over the next week. And Jarvis informed Steve that Tony was sleeping and eating.

So Steve simply shrugged and let it be. After all, as Clint thought, if Tony wanted to reassure himself that he was safe what better way of proving it than to show that no-one, not even his husband, could pull him out of his safe place. Though Clint knew that Steve would prefer it if Tony's safe place was in Steve's arms.

"Don't you get upset about this?" Natasha asked one day, about four days into Tony's hiding away.

"Love is one soul in two bodies." Steve smiled, "If he's happy, then I'm happy. This has really thrown him. I just hope he doesn't restrict his activities even more because of this."

That was a concern that Clint had as well. Every time something happened in Tony's life that was from outside sources he retreated into his lab for longer periods of time. Given time he would slowly emerge, but it took time. And Clint kept wondering what would eventually push Tony into his lab permanently.

The worst part was that Clint wasn't sure that he could bring himself to drag Tony out. He had seen how bad Tony could get when he was scared (for indeed it had to have been fear that Clint had seen when Tony was dying). And Clint could not bear it if Tony ever looked at him with that level of fear.

When Tony did finally emerge, he was quieter than he had been. However he did not shy away from communal activities such as movie night.

Tony had settled down on the sofa, waiting for Steve to return from collecting the pizzas. Bruce was finishing something up in his lab. Natasha was still in the shower after a long work-out. Phil was finishing up some more paperwork at SHIELD, but was coming over as soon as he finished. Rhodey was back with the military. Sam was stuck in traffic returning from DC after another session at the Centre. Clint was perched on the back of a comfy chair. And Thor was lounging in a chair large enough to be a throne.

"It is good that you have emerged from your room of Seidhr, Anthony of Stark." Thor smiled benevolently.

"Would you please stop insulting me?" Tony didn't look up from his tablet.

“I do not give you any insult.” Thor frowned, “You are one of the greatest Migardian Seidhr alive.”

“So Seidhr doesn’t have slight negative connotations?” Tony raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed not,” Thor countered, “Seidhr is well respected amongst Asgardians.”

“Then it doesn’t have Ergi connotations?” Tony challenged, “For those men who practice the art?”

Clint had no idea what was going on. The words made no sense to him. There were whole undercurrents of accusation in Tony’s tone. Clint knew he was missing something. But he didn’t know what.

“You are well taught in our ways.” Thor cocked his head to one side, “It is only to be expected, if a man’s practices a woman’s art.”

“Steve and Clint both cook,” Tony countered, “They cook really well. Does that make them any less men?”

“Indeed not.”

“And Lady Sif, from what I understand, is a Warrior.” Tony spoke again, “Does that make her any less a woman?”

“You impugn her honour.” Thor snarled, “She is a woman.”

“And she is a Warrior?” Tony pressed.

“Of course.” Thor snapped.

“Yet fighting is a man’s art.”

“That does not preclude a woman from being equally skilled. Indeed Lady Sif is one of our fiercest warriors.”

“Then why can not a man be Seidhr without being deemed unmanly?” Tony challenged.

“It simply cannot be so.”

“Tell me,” Tony’s eyes narrowed, “Loki is Seidhr. Very highly skilled from what I’ve heard and seen. He must have been practising from a very young age.”

“That is true.” Thor agreed.

“About the same amount of time you spent learning to fight, I would reckon.” Tony continued.

“We learned together.” Thor pointed out, “We often sparred together.”

“And you are the pinnacle of Asgardian male perfection?” Tony ventured, “With your muscles and your height?”

“It has often been said so.” Thor was frowning; clearly he didn’t know where this was going.

Clint feared he did.

“And Loki…” Tony frowned slightly, “He’s skinnier. Not as muscular. Dark haired too. I wouldn’t imagine that’s deemed desirable either. I reckon your people prefer blond over brunet. Blue eyes over green.”

“We are much like your own race in that regard.” Thor countered.

“So let’s count up the points against Loki,” Tony held up a hand, “He’s not muscular enough. He’s not tall enough. He has the wrong colour hair. He has the wrong colour eyes. He prefers books to fighting. He is stronger in Seidhr than in combat… I would wager that he got called many names. More than a few insults were hurled in his direction.”

“The tauntings of children.” Thor shrugged, “It is the way of children.”

“He was just a child then as well.” Tony pointed out, “And I don’t think it’s stopped either. Because he probably was always compared to you: ‘Why aren’t you more like Thor?’; ‘Thor could defeat three men and you had trouble with one?’; ‘Thor is out there hunting, why are you reading a book?’. I bet that was his life. I bet it still is.”

“What does it matter?” Thor challenged, “He is a Prince of Asgard. He is my brother. He does not have to listen to such remarks.”

“Yet he still would have heard them.” Tony retaliated, “Family doesn’t stop the comments from being said. Not unless they actually *do* something about it. And I bet that you made more than a few disparaging remarks about Seidhr. Probably to your friends. You probably thought nothing of it. Just a comment here and there to your friends. Just to fit in. To make yourself feel bigger than you were. Probably a little harsher than you meant if Loki had just shown you up. By doing better than you in something or by pulling a prank on you. And when you were being taught Seidhr, because I reckon you were taught it, but were a *lousy* student, and Loki kept beating you, you looked down on it. Because you weren’t any good at it therefore it was useless. I bet you stopped going to classes as soon as you could. And you told anyone who would listen that it was a useless subject. After all it was *unmanly*!”

Thor had risen to his feet as Tony's spiel continued. Tony rose to match him. Tony was staring up at Thor with no fear in his face, only the slightest amount of anger in his eyes.

Somewhere deep inside of Clint's brain a tiny portion of it was gibbering.

"You know what we call people like you in Migard?" Tony carried on, "We call you Jocks. But you're not just any Jock. You're the Star Quarterback. And we call people like Loki Geeks or Nerds. And you know what happens when you insult the Geek or the Nerd too many times? When you knock them down over and over again? When there's no-one who is really on their side? When they just have no support and no way to fight back against their tormentors? Because that's just what children do. That's just the way the world is. They need to learn to toughen up. It'll teach them to stand on their own feet. Teach them how to roll with the blows. You know what happens if you keep on doing that to a child?

"They snap. Then they commit suicide. Or they come to school with a gun and kill everyone they can. Only Loki didn't come to your school with a gun. He came to *ours*! He came here because you beat him down again and again and again. Until he couldn't take it anymore. I bet he tried so hard to impress you. To impress your father. But he couldn't measure up to you the Golden Boy. He couldn't match you. And he had that thrown in his face again and again and again. And everyone praising your achievements, while his own were swept under the rug. And you standing there with your friends adding insult to injury, quite literally in the case of the insults I bet. He couldn't take it. And he snapped."

"Are you accusing me of being responsible for Loki's crimes?" Thor snarled.

"No," Tony stepped closer, "No. Loki's actions were Loki's actions. His crimes are his and his alone. But you are responsible for *your* actions. Your actions *drove* him to this point. I wonder if you would be feeling the same if he'd gone the other way and killed himself? Because I bet he got close to it. I bet he decided to either conquer this world or die. I bet he was trying to impress your father. But didn't know any other way. After all your father was crowned King after defending all the Nine Realms. Wouldn't Loki be deemed worthy of just as much honour if he defeated an entire world? An entire Realm?"

"What would you know of Loki's treatment?" Thor sneered, "You have never spoken to my brother. You know nothing. Your words are not worth the air you have expended in speaking them."

"I know a lot more than you." Tony challenged, "Because I use my eyes and ears. I reviewed the footage from your first visit to Earth. I spoke to Jane and Darcy. I spoke to Selvig and others. I did my research into Ancient Norse. I did my research into Norse Mythology. I watched Loki. I compared. I thought. I used my blasted *brain.* Something that

you seem to have an aversion to using. And the more I looked the more I saw. And the more I realized that Loki… Loki is…

"He's just like me."

Clint nearly fell off his perch at the last four words. They were muttered quietly, and for a moment Clint wasn't sure that he'd heard correctly. His hearing wasn't perfect after all. But he had. He knew he had. It was clear from the emotions that flashed across Thor's face, before it evened out.

"You have not lashed out at the world like my brother." Thor smiled benevolently, "You are mistaken, Anthony of Stark."

"No, I am *not*!" Tony fired back, "I was always too smart. Too bright. At Junior School, at Middle School, at High School the teachers didn't like me knowing more than them. They didn't like that I wasn't scared to tell them that they were wrong. They didn't like that I would embarrass them in front of everyone. Because I would correct them. So when I came to them and said that some of the other students were calling me names, they told me to man up. When the insults became blows, they still didn't pay any attention. Just told me to man up. Told me to suck it up. Told me to ignore it. I was half the size of the students beating me up. Always been a bit on the small side. And I was years younger than my so-called intellectual peers.

"It only got worse at MIT. Because I was showing up experts in their fields. And I was still way too young to be there. I never bothered telling Howard what was going on. Stark men are made of Iron. That's what he always used to tell me. I learned that in my cradle. Stark men are made of Iron. Stark men don't complain. Stark men don't bow down. Stark men don't give in. Stark men resist everything. Stark men resist *anything*. Stark men are made of Iron.

"But I wasn't a man. I was just a child pretending to be a man. Because everyone expected me to be one. Because everyone expected me to be what they wanted me to be. So I pretended. I pretended it didn't hurt. I pretended the bruises weren't there. I pretended the cuts and scrapes weren't real. I pretended that they weren't hurting me. Even as the minor blows became major ones. Even as the bruises became broken bones. I still pretended that no-one was hurting me. Because I knew that if they saw that I was being hurt by them, it would only get worse.

“I was so very close to just killing myself. I had it all planned out. A bomb. A big one. I was going to take as many of them with me as I could.”

Clint could clearly see it in his mind. Even so, his heart was in his mouth as he heard Tony spill his guts.

“But one person stopped me.” Tony’s eyes were free of any tears, and Clint didn’t know how, he was fighting back his own.

“My brother.” Tony finished.

“Anthony of Stark,” Thor frowned, “You do not have a brother.”

“Not by blood,” Tony cocked his head briefly, “But I would have thought you of all people would understand that brotherhood is not made by blood. He was and is my brother by another mother. Rhodey stepped up. God only knows why. He didn’t have to. We were just partners on a project. But he saw what was going on. And he couldn’t stand for it. He stepped between me and the bullies. He stepped between me and the blows. For the first time in my *life* there was someone in my corner fighting my battles with me. Taking over when I wasn’t strong enough to fight them on my own or even at all.

“But that wasn’t all he did. He bandaged my wounds and taught me how to fight. He protected me and helped me to protect myself. He put himself in harm’s way for me. And showed me a better way to get my own back on those who hurt me.

“And it wasn’t just him. Because he was a pretty big guy on campus. Had a fair amount of respect from a lot of people. So he got his friends to protect me as well. He was an example to them. He was protecting the skinny, tiny, white, kid genius. So they did the same. They stopped the blows. Stood by my side against the insults. And eventually forced my abusers to stop completely.

“Without Rhodey I wouldn’t be here now. Without my brother I never would have made it this far. And he did all of that without thought of recompense. He did it without asking for payment.”

“He did receive payment though, Anthony of Stark.” Thor countered.

“He didn’t know that he would at the time,” Tony fired back, “For all he knew I would have forgotten him the moment I graduated. The moment our lives no longer had a reason to interact. The fact that I didn’t let that happen is down to *me*. Not due to any request on his part.

“You see that’s the crucial difference between me and Loki. My brother lifted me up. His brother tore him down.”

Clint was almost jibbering. He could see Thor was furious. And Tony was just a squishy, little human. Clint knew that he couldn’t protect Tony. Not from Thor. Not at this distance. Not without his bow.

“You dare?!” Thor roared.

“Yes, I dare!” Tony snapped back, “Because right now what you’ve done is lock Loki up. And yes, I know he deserves it. And it is right. He broke the law. He committed a crime. He should be punished. But you are only making the problem worse. Come the time when he gets out. Either you let him out because he’s done his time or he loses it and breaks out; we’ll be right back where we started. Or he’ll go completely the other way and kill himself in his pretty little prison cell. You and yours abused him. And it’s up to you to fix it!”

“I never laid a hand on my brother in the manner you so describe.”

“And it is not blows alone that defines abuse.” Tony retorted, “Abuse can be blows or words or touches or a whole *list* of other things. Where mine started as verbal and became physical; Loki’s never progressed from verbal. At least from *you*! But can you say the same for everyone else? He was beaten down, verbally if not physically, again and again and again. And he eventually snapped. Can you honestly say you didn’t have some influence on how he turned out? You are not responsible for his actions. I would never accuse you or anyone else of *that*. But you are responsible for your own actions. And it is those actions that caused Loki to walk the path he has walked. If you wish for him to come back from the dark place he has gone in his soul… Then you’d better start treating him better. You’d better start making amends. Start by fixing the rift between the two of you that you have caused.

“I am sure that once upon a time you were close brothers. That you loved each other. But now, thanks to your more recent actions, all those precious wonderful memories are tainted with bitterness. After all he doesn’t know how far back the teasing words started to have malice. In his head they always did.

“And the best and fastest way for you to repair some of the damage you have done is to acknowledge his skill in Seidhr and that it does not impair or affect his manliness to be so skilled in that area.”

“A true man defeats his enemy through strength in combat,” Thor snarled, “Not through deceit and trickery.”

“I was in a cave,” Tony closed his eyes, “A prisoner. Half-starved from lack of food. Injured from open heart surgery with no anaesthetic. Twice. Half-drowned from water-boarding. Already beaten half to death. Nearly worn through my last reserves of energy as I tried to keep myself alive and safe and find some way to escape. Outnumbered at *least* ten to one. And they came in once again. They couldn’t kill me. Not then. I was still useful. But there was another man. He wasn’t useful to them. But he was a good friend. He’d kept me alive. He’s the only reason I survived the attack. He’s the only reason I had hope. He’d been there longer than me. Was probably in a worse condition. And they held him down and went to torture him. They wanted to know what I was building. He kept telling them I was building what they wanted. He didn’t waver. Didn’t surrender. Didn’t give in. I was about to watch a good man get killed for my sake. What would you have done?”

“I would have fought.” Thor declared, “I would have killed the cowardly knaves and all that stood in our path of escape.”

“And you would have died.” Tony pointed out, “They had guns. I had nothing. They were many. I was one. They were strong. I was weak. Instead I used my brain. I spun a lie. More truth than lie, though if I’m honest. I told them I needed him. Said if they wanted their missile I needed him. I told them he was a good worker. They left him alone. We are not all blessed with strength of body. For some of us, it is strength of mind that is our greatest asset. That does not make us lesser. That does not make us inferior. A body is strong for a while. But eventually it will become weak. A mind can be strong for far longer. And can be strong in a body completely useless to the mind. But that does not make them someone to ignore. Anger geeks at your peril. For we know how to *seriously* mess with your life. It’s the age of the Geek.”

“Have a care,” Thor frowned, “You know not of what you speak. Loki does not feel the way you believe.”

“Ask him.” Tony matched Thor’s steely gaze, “Go to your brother and ask him if I’m wrong. Ask him if he doesn’t feel the way I say. Only after you have done that will I concede that I am wrong. When the one who is hurting has denied it. Not the one who had hurt him.”

Tony turned away and sat down on the end of the couch nearest Clint’s perch.

“Sorry, Clint.” Tony murmured, the words only just reaching Clint’s ears, “I know you don’t like Loki. But I believe every word I said. Forgive me?”

“Just don’t play chicken with the Asgardian God again.” Clint almost begged, “You scared me. I thought he was going to lose his temper and hit you. You’d die from that.”

“It’s called sheer gall.” Tony smirked, “Keep them off balance and they often forget to lash out.”

“Or they lash out.” Clint reminded.

“It was a risk.” Tony shrugged, “But I felt it was necessary. Besides you were here.”

“I couldn’t have done anything.” Clint pointed out.

A glint of metal caught Clint’s eyes, as Tony waved his arms in a clearly dismissive motion.

“What are those?” Clint pointed at Tony’s wrists, where two new metal bracelets sat.

“Just something I’m working on.” Tony replied, “I’m not going to be helpless again. By the way, thanks for contacting Coulson. Reckoned that was the quickest way to get SHIELD on my case.”

“Is that why you had me down as your contact?” Clint breathed.

“Well,” Tony smiled, “That and I knew you’d keep your head about you. You wouldn’t go rushing off and do something stupid. You think things through. Steve would probably just charge in and get himself killed on my behalf. You were safer. You think. You plan.”

“Steve does that.” Clint challenged, “You haven’t seen him when we’re working.”

“But that’s work.” Tony countered, “That’s not personal.”

Any further conversation was cut off by the others walking in. Clint tried desperately to get the delayed shakes under control. He watched Thor, who sat there with a contemplative look on his face for a short while. It was soon replaced by a smiling face as he got into the film.

But Clint couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if Tony had been right.

Chapter End Notes

Please note, this is an unscheduled early post, to celebrate both the end of NaNoWriMo, without which this story would not exist, and the fact that I have finally reached and passed the teaser scene in my writing. Though that is unlikely to come to you readers for quite some time.

Chapter 28: Chapter 27

"Tony," Clint pulled the genius aside the next day, "About yesterday."

"I'm sorry you had to hear that." Tony looked away, "But it needed to be said."

"I'm not upset about that." Clint dismissed the concern, "What made me worry was your comments about suicide. More specifically about *you* and suicide. Did you really…?"

"Oh," Tony shrugged, "Yes. I was going to take out the Athletics Centres. And probably a good portion of the rest of the campus. Including the chapel. If I was going, I wasn't going to go alone. My main problem was making the explosives. But I was getting there. Was nearly ready when Rhodey got assigned as my partner."

"And he stopped the bullying." Clint acknowledged.

"Reduced it." Tony countered, "It took him longer to stop it. But the key thing was that he *cared*. He cared and it wasn't fake. I tried a couple of times to prove that he was just pretending. He passed every test I put to him. It took him less than a week to realize that I was being bullied and to start doing something about it."

"He's a good friend." Clint smiled, "But Tony…"

"Look," Tony grinned, "Don't worry about it. I'm not in that dark place anymore. I'm not that same kid. I've got you guys. I'm not saying that all suicidal people are alone. But they are lonely. And yes, there is a difference."

"I know." Clint agreed, "Tony, I just want you to promise that if you ever feel like you're going down that path again… Talk to me. Any time. Anywhere. I don't care what it is. You start feeling like that's your only option, you come to me."

"Clint," Tony spoke calmly, "I've got far too much to do. A lot of work that I need to sort out. Things I need to sort out."

"Just promise me, Tony." Clint insisted.

"I promise." Tony stated, "But you don't have to worry about it. As long as I have Steve, I'm never going to be walking that path again. I'm not going to go there again. I wouldn't do that to Steve."

And that was reassuring enough for Clint. He knew that Tony loved Steve with everything possible.

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Another day, another battle. Hawkeye was almost getting bored of the repetitiveness of his life.

But this was a strange battle, even for the Avengers.

Iron Man had re-emerged from wherever he had taken himself for his apparent retirement, approximately four months ago.

And he was attacking a SHIELD base. Not a big one. Just a small minor one. Just a research base. It wasn't important. It wasn't doing any major research. It was just a tiny little outpost in the middle of nowhere Alaska.

But it seemed to have personally insulted Iron Man as he was methodically razing it to the ground. Considering that Iron Man had previously veered away from any deliberate significant property damage it was completely out of character.

Just to add to the confusion Iron Man wasn't alone.

He had never teamed up with anyone before. There were theories that he was too narcissistic to do so. Or that he was too driven on his mission of revenge to take anyone with him.

But there was most definitely someone assisting him.

Sniper style shots were coming at various points. Often driving away the Avengers from Iron Man when they got too close. The shots themselves never connected. But it didn't stop them from being dangerous.

The shots *would* have connected if they hadn't dodged. There was always a brief pause between the laser sight landing on a person and the shot. Hawkeye had two theories about that, either the sniper wasn't one of the better ones and needed the laser sight.

Or, and this was the more worrying one, he *was* that good, and didn't want to hurt them. He, or she, was using the laser sight as a warning system.

Hawkeye was trying to find the sniper's hide. But it seemed to be too well hidden. Or, and this was Hawkeye's preferred theory, the sniper kept moving.

It was clear that Iron Man knew who was protecting him. Every so often he would offer up a slightly irreverent salute in the vague direction that the shot came from.

Once the outpost was razed to the ground, it was clear that Iron Man was going to leave. Captain America managed to get close enough, due to the combined distraction prowess of the Black Widow, Hawkeye and Falcon.

"Why are you doing this?" Captain America yelled, "This isn't like you. You don't do this sort of thing."

"And how would you know?" Iron Man returned, "You don't know anything about me."

"I know you had a reason for doing what you did." Captain America challenged, "I know you. I know you better than you think. You fight for justice and equality and fairness. You fight to stop crimes from happening. This is not like you."

"Perhaps you don't know as much as you think you do." Iron Man fired back, "Perhaps you don't know as much about *everything* that you think you do. They say a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, but it's not one half as bad as a lot of ignorance. And that's what you've got. Ignorance."

Another shot caused the Captain to jump backwards. Iron Man lifted upwards into the air, easily dodging past Falcon, who was out of position, thanks to the earlier shots. Iron Man swept down and lifted up a figure. Most likely the sniper, Hawkeye decided.

He couldn't make out much of the sniper. He was too far away. What he could make out was a dark figure with what appeared to be objects attached to him. Most likely weapons. Hawkeye would wager that the man was heavily armed, although not in an armoured suit like Iron Man.

But apart from that, they were nameless, faceless and formless.

"Do we have *any* information on the sniper?" Agent Coulson asked in debrief, "Did *anyone* get close enough to describe him?"

"Not at all." Falcon shrugged, "He was too far away."

"I'll say something," Hawkeye added, "He's an excellent shot. To fire from that distance requires a great deal of skill."

"But none of the shots connected with any of you." Agent Coulson countered.

"I believe that was intentional." Hawkeye declared, "Iron Man has never majorly injured a person before. If he has teamed up with this sniper, he might have imposed the same restrictions on the sniper."

"But why would the sniper conform to the demands of Iron Man?" The Black Widow asked, "It makes no sense. And a sniper of that quality, if he is as good as Hawkeye believes, would not be one who would be willing to submit to another person. Unless Iron Man is paying him."

"Iron Man does not seem to be one who would hire people to fight for him." War Machine put in, "Otherwise I think he'd have done it before."

"Captain?" Agent Coulson looked at the unusually quiet soldier; he had not given any additional specifics as to the mission, only the barest of details.

"Huh?" Captain America looked up from his notepad, "Sorry, just thinking."

"About what?" Falcon frowned.

"Iron Man." Captain America shrugged, "Something was off about him."

"What do you mean?" Hawkeye cocked his head to one side.

"He kept saluting the sniper." Captain America looked down at his sketching, "I do that. Whenever a sniper takes out someone who was going to threaten me, if I can, I salute them. It's an old habit of mine. Been doing it ever since I became a soldier. I do it to *you*. He was mocking me. He's never done that before. He's taunted us. He's teased us. He's insulted us. But he's never mocked us like that before. He's never mocked *me* before."

"What are you suggesting?" Agent Coulson frowned.

"What proof do we have that it's the same person?" Captain America challenged, "It's the same suit or a variation on it. We all could see that. But we couldn't see his face. We couldn't hear his actual voice. How do we know it's the same man? Or even a man at all?"

“We don’t.” The Black Widow declared firmly, “But we need more proof than a hunch.”

“Besides,” Falcon put in, “I rather doubt that Iron Man would just leave his suit lying around for anyone to just pick up. And flying that thing? My wings required specialist training… How much training did War Machine need to get his suit operational?”

“Not a lot considering.” Agent Coulson countered, “However it was designed by Stark. Particularly *for* Colonel Rhodes. They both know how the other thinks. So that took some of the problem out of the learning curve. I know Stark mentioned that he used an intuitive operating system tuned to Colonel Rhodes’ thought process along with a fairly basic AI system. Not anywhere near Jarvis’ intelligence, but enough to assist with aiming and flight. Unfortunately the operating system was and is so well tuned to Colonel Rhodes’ thought processes that it is virtually impossible for anyone else to operate the system without considerable training. And the system seems to learn from the operator to change how the system works in order for the operator to utilise the system better. Which really isn’t helping us in reverse engineering the programing.

“However I do understand where you are coming from, Falcon.” Agent Coulson continued, “I agree, it is doubtful that just anyone has managed to take up the suit and perfect the control system to such a degree.”

Hawkeye had to agree. Despite the unusual actions from Iron Man and Captain America’s doubt, he felt it was more likely that Iron Man had changed in his personality than the operator had changed. Though what had caused such a change was not something that Hawkeye would be willing to guess at. Not without further information.

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When they got back to the Tower, Thor was sitting in the communal living room, despair clearly written on his face. Though that wasn’t too surprising, Thor didn’t have much of a poker face. Every emotion he ever felt was written across his face in ten foot high letters.

“Hey,” Clint nudged Thor, “You alright? Is everything alright in Asgard?”

“I spoke with my brother.” Thor confessed, “I confronted him with Anthony of Stark’s accusations. I expected him to laugh it off. I thought he would consider our Anthony a fool.”

“But he didn’t.” Clint realized.

“He asked if I wanted to hear the lie that I had told myself a thousand times before,” Thor explained, “If I wanted him to be the Silver-Tongue and the Lie-Smith that we often called him in his youth. Or if I wanted to hear the truth. If I wanted to hear the truth that would cut me to the quick.”

“He didn’t have to say it then.” Clint breathed.

“I still asked him to.” Thor stated, “He was calm, composed. I did not think that my actions had affected him in any great deal. Loki though has ever been a master of illusion.”

“What was he like?” Clint asked with morbid curiosity.

“I demanded the truth, and he dropped the illusion he kept around himself and the cell,” Thor murmured, “I have never seen my brother in such a state. He has torn apart his furniture and he cares not for his personal appearance. Yet he is still so proud that he does not wish anyone to see his downfall.”

“And?” Clint gently pressed.

“He agreed with all that our Anthony had suggested.” Thor admitted, “I saw the truth in his eyes. There were no lies or deceit in him at that moment. I have done my brother a grievous wrong. It is to my shame that the consequences so affected Migard.”

“You were a child.” Clint reminded, “It was the responsibilities of the adults to correct your behaviour.”

“My brother was also a child.” Thor countered, “I was instructed, at an early age, that my job was to protect him and to look after him. We were shield brothers once.”

“You can change your behaviour now.” Clint pointed out.

“Indeed I can,” Thor agreed, “I have already taken my first steps towards doing so. I must request leave to visit my brother more regularly. Discussion appears to be the best manner with which to repair the damage to our bond that I have caused. Mayhaps I will lead him back from the darkness into which he has fallen. I may, with time, have no need to mourn the loss of my brother whom I remember so fondly. The innocent child of his youth.”

“It was worth it then?” Clint smiled, “It was worth listening to our Migardian Seidhr?”

“Indeed,” Thor half-laughed, “Loki even remarked that of all the Migardians our Anthony was the least lost of all. He attributed it to the fact that our Anthony knew he was lost in the first place and acknowledged himself as such.”

“The first step towards solving a problem is acknowledging that a problem exists in the first place.” Clint agreed.

But something was niggling at the back of Clint's mind. However when he tried to reach out to grab hold of it, it slipped through his fingers as if it were only mist.

Chapter 29: Chapter 28

"Everyone!" Sam yelled, "It's on!"

There was a virtual stampede for the living room. All of the Tower's inhabitants desperate to get a good seat for the upcoming spectacle.

"I can't wait to see how Tony does." Rhodey grinned, "It's always fun watching him deal with the Media."

"He's done more than a few of these dog and pony shows." Clint agreed, "From what I've seen he usually upsets the intended program."

"I do not understand, Son of Barton," Thor frowned, "Our Anthony will have a hound and a horse involved in this program?"

"No," Steve snorted, "It just means that the interviewer has a whole set list of questions and is expecting Tony to react in a certain way. It's a heavily scripted show. But Tony doesn't do well in following other people's directions."

"Not at all." Natasha smirked, "He never has."

"I'll say." Bruce added, "You should see the way he reacts when the R&D department tries to correct him."

"He won't take it unless he respects them." Phil nodded, "Who's running herd on him today?"

"Pepper." Steve answered, "And Happy's there with two other bodyguards. Just in case. He didn't want me there. Said he didn't want me forced into the spotlight. I *said* I could just pretend to be another bodyguard."

"And he said," Rhodey laughed, "That he wouldn't be able to *treat* Steve like any other bodyguard."

"Too true." Natasha put in, "His eyes light up every time he sees Steve. Love written across his face clear to see to anyone with eyes."

"Verily," Thor boomed, "Our Anthony does not hide his true feelings towards any of us. I can only be glad that he has forgiven myself for my unintentional insult."

"Shh!" Clint hissed, "It's starting!"

All of them turned their attention to the television, bowls of popcorn in easy reach. This was going to be a show to remember.

"So, Mister Stark…" The poor unsuspecting interviewer looked at Tony.

By Clint's reckoning they'd chosen the interviewer fairly well, given Tony's previous predilections. Young, female and very, very pretty; although Clint suspected there was a shrewd mind underneath the perfectly coiffured hairstyle.

But this wasn't the same Tony they were interviewing.

"Tony, please." Tony corrected.

"Tony," The smile was pretty and her voice light, "Six months after what many refer to as the Battle of New York, how are you doing?"

"Pretty well, Rosa." Tony smiled broadly, "But like New York herself, recovery is still on going."

"Many people would say that your company has only increased in strength since the Battle." Rosa pointed out, "There are some that are accusing you from profiteering from the attack."

"As a company we simply took advantage of the situation," Tony returned, "It turns out that many, many years of company research into what people want and need is absolutely nothing compared to actually sitting down with the person on the street and *asking* them what they want. One of the first new products we produced after the Battle of New York was the Light-Band. That was invented by me after one of the children displaced by the destruction informed me that they couldn't sleep without their nightlight. They asked me to keep it secret, because their mommy didn't know that they still used it. They were scared of the dark and it had only gotten worse because they had gotten trapped under a fallen building in the dark, fortunately without serious injury. I invented it so that they wouldn't be in that situation again. Many children talked to me while I housed them until they and their families could be relocated. And I learned a lot about what they wanted to do. What they wanted to play with. What would help their lives."

"You spoke with children?"

"I spoke with anyone who would talk to me," Tony shrugged, "The children were the easiest. They don't know enough about me to be overawed or scared. They don't care that I'm famous. They don't care that I'm rich. It's actually really refreshing. The medics took longer to warm up to me. But I have a friend who talked to them for me. I found out what

they wanted. What would make their lives easier. And then I built it. That's why we have been so profitable. That's where our success has come from."

"So you haven't been effectively profiteering?"

"We haven't cranked the price up," Tony countered, "We aren't overcharging. Hell, I've given away more of the medical equipment to charities than we've sold."

"There are other people who are accusing you of favouring people during the recovery efforts."

"Let me guess," Tony laughed lightly, "It depended upon what sexual favours they were willing to give me."

"That is the accusation. Given your history you can understand why most people could believe it. Particularly given this footage, which has only just reached the media outlets."

It was rather jerky and clearly from a cell phone, but the footage of Tony launching himself at Steve could clearly be seen.

"I don't see any problem with that." Tony shrugged.

"You don't see any problem with basically forcing yourself upon another man?" Rosa raised an eyebrow, "I would expect a CEO of a multibillion company to know a great deal more about sexual harassment."

"I rather doubt that my husband would ever report sexual harassment to lawyers." Tony returned, "Given that sexual harassment is unwanted, undesired. And my husband has *never* rejected any of my advancements."

"Husband?" Rosa yelped, "You're married? Since when?"

"I married him the same week I was restored to my position as CEO of Stark Industries."

"There was no announcement."

"I chose to keep my private life just that, private." Tony retorted.

"Hold on… You're gay?"

"No," Tony shook his head, "I'm bisexual. However I fail to see how my sexuality affects anyone other than my husband and myself."

“Considering all the many, many women you have slept with other the years,” Rosa frowned, “You could be accused of leading them on.”

“It was all just fun,” Tony countered, “And everyone knew that.”

“Did they?”

“I never promised more than I was willing to give. I never took more than they were willing to give.” Tony almost chided, “So I hardly see how I could be accused of leading them on.”

“And your… Husband?” Clint definitely noticed a slight amount of revulsion and disgust in the word. He would wager that she had been hoping to have a round with Tony herself later.

“He chased me.” Tony smiled, “He didn’t know who I was. And he didn’t really care. He loves me for me. Not for Stark. Not for Anthony. But for Tony. That’s the important thing.”

“What’s about this man, you also hugged? Doesn’t your husband get jealous if you act like that around other men?”

“He’s a friend. Was best man at the wedding.” Tony shrugged, “He was lost. Lonely. Grieving. Needed a place to stay while he tried to get his life back on track. So that was me telling my husband that he’d be staying with us for a while.”

“And he just took that?”

“Of course,” Tony agreed, “Look, your best friend is down on their luck. Having a hard time. They think they’ve lost the love of their life… What do you do? Do you let them go sleeping in a place that only reminds them of all that they’ve lost? Or do you, with a bedroom to spare in your house, let him live with you? He needed a place to stay. I had a place for him to stay. I did what any good friend would do.”

“Ever since you were reinstated as CEO you have been incredibly hesitant to emerge from your ivory tower.”

“Steel and glass.” Tony corrected, “And no, it’s not since I became CEO. It’s been since I came back from Afghanistan. PTSD is a hard condition to deal with. I spent a great deal of time trying to get my head on straight. The society that I would be expected to deal with… Most of them didn’t get that. They couldn’t understand my frame of reference. They hadn’t experienced anything like what I had. I took myself away from those who were unintentionally making things worse for me.

“But I wasn’t hiding in some ivory tower. I was down on the street, walking amongst the people. No-one recognised me. So I was free to live my life without anyone’s expectations. That gave me the time to get treatment. Gave me time to sort out who I was and

what I wanted from life. I spent a lot of time in Central Park watching people. Spent a lot of time just being me. Away from the media. Away from everyone who prejudged me.

"My husband doesn't prejudge me. He never has. Even when his best friend looked up everything about me and offered to tell him, he never listened to a word. He loves me for me. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health."

"So it is not about your money?"

"If it was he would have asked for more than he has. As it is, he acts as if I am wasting money if I spend any on him. I love him for that. He's changed my life. And I don't know what I'd do without him. I don't know if I'd be capable of dealing with my job as CEO without him."

"What is his name?"

"Now why should I give you that? Don't want to make things too easy for you. My private life is my private life. I'm not dragging my husband into the media spotlight. I grew up in the spotlight. I'm used to it. He's never been in the spotlight. He doesn't deserve to be dragged in to it. And that being said, this interview is over. Good night and goodbye, Rosa."

Tony almost waltzed off the screen.

"Damn," Clint grinned, "He's good."

"Our Anthony is honourable," Thor declared, "Not revealing a name despite considerable pressure."

"He said he didn't want me to be put under the microscope of the media." Steve smiled, "But he knew our marriage would come out eventually. However they will find it hard to get into the building, and with all the back exits Tony put into the design…"

"I'd call him paranoid," Phil snorted, "But he actually has a reason for being the way he is. Once burned…"

"Twice shy." Natasha finished, "He's increasing security in the Tower as well. You all noticed the increase in security guards for the lower floors?"

"Yes." Bruce nodded, "I know they turned away General Ross the other day. Attacked him with the lawyers as well."

"Please tell me we have footage of that." Clint begged.

The evening evolved into an impromptu movie night. Clint was only just awake when Tony returned from the interview, so he got to see the adorable sight of Tony climbing into Steve's lap to go to sleep.

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Clint was looking for Tony. The genius had gone wandering off into the R&D labs to talk with the scientists there. However Clint wanted to talk with him about organising a birthday party for Phil. Preferably a surprise one.

Something caught Clint's attention from the corner of his eye. A stack of boxes in the process of being moved into a storage room was not balanced properly and had started to fall.

A kid, and he had to be a kid not even fully grown, was standing at the bottom of the stack. Clint made a snap judgement and charged forward.

He barrelled the kid out the way of the falling boxes. Clint hadn't bothered yelling. The kid was clearly a geek. What with his clothes and thick-rimmed glasses and his skinny, *skinny* frame. He wouldn't have been able to get out the way.

"Th… Thanks." The kid managed to get out after a moment catching his breath.

"You're welcome," Clint sighed in relief, "You alright?"

"Bit bruised," The kid shrugged, "But I'll be okay. Better than I would have been. Who are you? I've not seen you around."

"I'm Clint. You? I don't remember being told there was a kid in the R&D labs."

"Peter," The kid replied, "Peter Parker. I'm the intern."

"Intern?" Clint frowned, "You can't be out of high school."

"I'm not." Peter stated, "But I wrote a paper on a chemical processes to produce an economical, sterilized material for wound dressing that could increase the rate of regeneration of damaged cells. It is based on the formulation for spider… And you have no idea what I'm talking about."

“Absolutely none,” Clint confessed, “But I know a few guys who might.”

“I used to help Doctor Conners over at Oscorp,” Peter explained, “He knew my father. I think that, along with my paper, helped me get the job here. I was hired by Mister Stark himself.”

“Tony must have seen some potential in you.” Clint realized, “From what I understand he rarely hires anyone himself. At least not at the intern level.”

“I know.” Peter agreed, “And the pay is much better than I expected. My Aunt May was worried about the rent. But now we don’t have to worry as much. I mean things are tight…”

“But there’s tight and there’s tight.” Clint nodded in understanding, “So what do you do?”

“Fetch and carry mainly.” Peter shrugged, “Occasionally I get asked to work on a project. Mister Stark actually usually asks me to help on some of his personal projects. I don’t mind. Programing is something I enjoy, so working with him and Jarvis is an incredible opportunity. What do you do here?”

“Oh,” Clint smiled, “I’m Tony’s friend. I technically live here. I’m looking for Tony, heard he was on this floor. Do you know where?”

“Currently?” Peter raised an eyebrow, “Probably yelling at the guys in the phone section about the most recent progress report. Basically there wasn’t.”

“A report?” Clint pressed.

“Progress.” Peter grimaced, “I knew he wouldn’t be happy. They’ve been quite willing to sit on their laurels recently. Given how well the Starkphone has been selling. I mean it’s out performing everything else in the market. But in that business everything can change in a day.”

“Ah,” Clint breathed, “And which way is that?”

“Down the corridor,” Peter motioned, “Hang a left and then it’s the third on the right. He’s video conferencing with the rest of the team. It’s got sections in each of the major Starktech labs.”

“Right.” Clint nodded, “And kid?”

“Yeah?” Peter looked at him.

“Don’t let them stack the boxes that high again.” Clint grinned, “Next time I might not be around to save you.”

“Got it.” Peter laughed.

Clint left the intern to move the boxes into the stock room as he carried on down to find Tony. A smile playing on Clint's lips as he walked. He liked the kid. Clearly an orphan by his own words, but making his own way. And if he was as intelligent as Clint *thought* he was, he was someone for Clint to keep an eye on in the future. Possibly to recruit as a SHIELD Scientist. Though undoubtedly Peter would have better toys to play with if he remained with Stark Industries.

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Once again Doctor Doom had gone off his meds, Hawkeye mused. He wondered what meds Doctor Doom was actually on. And if he wasn't on medication, what medication he needed to *start*. It slightly worried him that a mind so intelligent and rational, could be so illogical and insane as to think that he could conquer America.

Why did he even *want* to conquer America? Everyone knew that he had a major crush on the Invisible Woman, AKA Sue Storm. He couldn't believe that she would be impressed by such an action. Could he?

But those were thoughts Hawkeye would have to return to later. If he returned to them at all. He had a team to protect. His position of overwatch being quite useful as he took in the scene below.

Falcon and War Machine were driving and leading the Doombots back towards Captain America and the Black Widow, while Thor electrocuted any of the drones that managed to get close to the edge of the containment zone. The main problem with that was that some of the bots were protected against electricity and it was impossible to tell which ones until they refused to lie down and die. A fact which was severely annoying Hawkeye.

The Hulk was having a great deal of fun smashing the bots.

Hawkeye couldn't be certain in the report he would write later where Iron Man came from. Only that the armoured Supervillain appeared. Though he did suspect that he had entered the fray from the direction of Long Island.

Iron Man was once again defending his right to the territory of New York. And defending it fiercely.

His sniper friend also appeared to be in the area. Judging by the close shots that Doctor Doom was receiving. Though these were a lot closer than had been tried against the Avengers. However he was also shooting down the drones.

"War Machine," Hawkeye spoke quickly into his mike, "The sniper seems to be on your ten. Can you investigate?"

"Ten four." War Machine replied, "If that's okay with you, Captain?"

"Do it!" Captain America ordered, "The Doombots are far fewer than they were. We can hold our own. I want to know who is helping Iron Man."

"I'll see if I can get a photo." War Machine declared swooping off towards the most likely hide of the sniper.

However it seemed that Iron Man had finished his argument with Doctor Doom and realized the threat towards his colleague. The red and gold armour soared after War Machine and managed to collect the black clad villain before War Machine got close enough to fully engage with a human safely.

And despite what people thought, repulsors were *not* a safe weapon unless at a very close distance for humans. Too great a risk of aiming incorrectly and seriously injuring someone according to both Tony and Colonel Rhodes.

Hawkeye was forced to watch once again as the villainous duo left the vicinity too quickly to be followed or tracked.

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At the debrief, though, War Machine was able to show a picture he had managed to capture of the sniper.

There was a barely perceptible intake of breath from the Black Widow. However it was so unlike the stoic former Russian that it immediately caught the attention of both Hawkeye and Agent Coulson.

"Black Widow?" Agent Coulson turned to her, "You have something to say?"

"That is the Winter Soldier." She declared firmly, "He is credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last fifty years."

"The Winter Soldier is a story," Hawkeye countered, "A ghost story at that. He doesn't exist."

"No." The Black Widow shook her head, "I have faced him once before. I saved a man he intended to kill. He then shot a bullet through me into his target. I was left with a scar, which seriously impedes my ability to wear a bikini. The target was not so lucky. He died. The Winter Soldier is very, very good. The only reason we are alive right now is that he wasn't trying to kill us. Though I don't know why."

"What do you suspect?" Falcon queried.

"I don't know." The Black Widow shrugged, "This is not like him. Or at least the rumours I've heard. He does a mission. He vanishes. He kills. He disappears. He always kills. I've never heard of him doing something like this. Somehow Iron Man has something he wants or knows something to change his usual modus operandi."

"You sound like you fear him." War Machine frowned.

"No." The Black Widow breathed slowly, "I respect his skill. I respect his legend. I am cautious. Because caution is what has kept me alive all these years. Do *not* underestimate him. Once he has obtained what Iron Man is keeping from him in order to bend the Winter Soldier to his will, he will either kill Iron Man and vanish or just vanish. That is if we are lucky. If we are unlucky he will chose to kill us."

"You believe that he is only temporarily… Tamed? For lack of a better word," Captain America pressed, "That it is Iron Man's desire to keep us alive? Not his own?"

"Yes." The Black Widow nodded, "Do not delude yourselves into believing he has changed. He has been travelling the same violent path for too long to return from it. His ledger is soaked in blood."

Hawkeye shivered at the cold manner in which the Black Widow delivered her information. It seemed that the Winter Soldier, for all he had believed that he was a story to keep people awake at night, was a dangerous foe.

Though how such an assassin managed to make a living when the only information about him was whispers about a ghost was beyond Hawkeye. After all everyone had to get paid. And in order to get paid you had to get hired, right? And to get hired people had to know who you were.

So how were people contacting the Winter Soldier with contracts?

Chapter 30: Chapter 29

Tony was asleep on the couch when they returned from the mission. He was curled up like some kind of cat, clearly enjoying all the space he had available to hog. So was positioned right in the middle, where he could affect anyone else joining him with the minimum of effort.

Steve smiled broadly as he carefully inserted himself behind Tony, so that he could curl around Tony.

Only half-awake Tony turned and without opening his eyes, kissed Steve.

"I love you." Tony murmured sleepily.

"I know." Steve replied nudging Tony back into slumber.

"Sometimes," Clint whispered, "You two are so cute, it is actually sickening."

"Go cuddle your boyfriend." Steve retorted, "Besides I don't get to do enough of this. What with our job calling us all hours of the day. And him holing up in his shop half the time. I'm a bit worried about him. He's not sleeping enough. And don't get me started on his diet."

"He's venturing out into the R&D lab floors, I think." Clint shrugged, "I've got a contact down there. Might be able to get a read on how often he goes there."

"I could provide you with that information, Master Clint." Jarvis spoke softly.

"And sometimes Tony will tell you to be quiet." Clint countered easily, "I'd rather an information source Tony *can't* order around easily."

"You found a scientist with enough guts to go against Tony?" Bruce blinked, "Usually they either bow down to him or they're so wrapped up in their own work that they wouldn't notice if the Other Guy was lose in the corridor."

"Just the corridor?" Clint teased.

"If I did it in the lab I'd mess up their experiment." Bruce shrugged

Bruce was, by now, a lot more comfortable with the idea of the Hulk, mainly due to Tony's acceptance of "The Other Guy".

“Look,” Clint grinned, “I’ve spoken to this guy a couple of times. He’s kinda fun. I like him. He’s not a typical scientist. Just like you aren’t. And Tony isn’t. There’s something… *Special* about him. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know how to define it. But I know it’s there. Besides, he’s a friend. Of a sort. I’ll get Peter to alert me if Tony’s spotted on the lab floors. Then we can make sure that he eats and gets enough sleep.”

“We just need to remind him.” Bruce put in.

“Remind him of what?” Steve frowned.

“That he matters to us.” Bruce smiled, “That we care. And that he needs to look after himself. As well as the rest of the world. He’s got such a big heart.”

“It’s a shame that no-one really sees it.” Steve sighed, “He hides away behind all the bluster and showmanship. You know he’s got the first Arc-Reactor he made in his lab?”

“No.” Clint hadn’t looked in there, though he was curious about the change in tack.

“Pepper turned it into a display piece.” Steve continued, “She had words engraved around it. It reads: Proof that Tony Stark has a heart.”

“Ouch.” Clint breathed.

“I don’t think she meant it the way that it sounds.” Bruce shrugged, “She cares. Just in her own way. In the way that Tony needs her to care about him. As a teasing sister. I think… That if she’d been a bit different, if he’d been a bit different, if life had been a bit different… I think they would have dated. At least for a while.”

“That would have been weird.” Clint frowned, “I can’t imagine anything other than what we have… Steve, I think the best thing you did in your life was go up and introduce yourself to Tony. He’s good for you. Good for us. This is better than anything I ever dreamed of. I have an anchor. I have shelter against the storm.”

“You should tell him that.” Steve declared.

“God, no!” Clint laughed, “It’d only give him a big head… Look, get some sleep. I’ll see if I get up in time to bake some muffins.”

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Sometimes Hawkeye honestly believed that the Fantastic Four got a tip off whenever something spectacularly *stupid* was going to happen. They always seemed to be out of town when the worst of the attacks happened. Particularly those that seemed to be completely

illogical and irrational; or where exactly the type of things that Reed Richards should have to deal with.

Case in point, the current invasion through a portal. Now the Fantastic Four had often fought invaders through a portal (being out of town for the Battle of New York, the lucky sods), and Richards was a bit of an expert on closing the damn things by now.

But the Fantastic Four were currently in space, working on something with Cosmic Rays. Hawkeye hadn't really been paying any attention when Agent Coulson had been briefing them.

And this was *just* the sort of situation that looked stupid from the outside. Because the Earth was being invaded by giant *butterflies*!

Butterflies large enough that their bodies were longer than Thor was tall. Their wings were even bigger still. Mesmerising in their beauty, but relatively solid. Hawkeye did *not* want to get hit by one of them.

To make it worse, a fatal blow on one of the butterflies made it poof into glittery dust. That could, or could not, have toxic properties.

Hawkeye had visions of wailing children… Probably girls, when they saw the footage from this fight.

He, as usual, had his Overwatch position, but it was more dangerous than it usually was, considering that the butterflies could get up to his height relatively easily, quickly and without warning.

Falcon and War Machine were soaring around trying to keep the butterflies and therefore the damage controlled. Captain America and the Black Widow were trying to find the source of the portal so they could turn the damn thing off. The Hulk had initially not wanted to hurt the "Pretty Bu-flies", but after one of them had actually attacked him had gone slightly off the deep end. Thor was trying to electrocute the butterflies as they came through the portal, but there seemed to be more than he could control.

“Everyone,” Captain America came over the comms, “Stop messing around and kill these things. Falcon, War Machine, reduce the playing field.”

“What’s the matter, cap?” Falcon asked.

“I just found three of the butterflies feasting on a human.” Captain America replied, “They killed her.”

“You’re saying we’ve got man-*eating* butterflies?” Hawkeye yelped, “How in the name of all that is holy is that even a *thing*?”

The intensity of the fight stepped up. The Avengers desperately not wanting to lose any more civilians to the butterflies were killing any and all of the creatures that they could. They no longer cared how it would look on the news.

But they were starting to tire. The relentlessness of the battle was taking its toll on all of them.

All it took was a moment of inattention on Falcon’s part for a butterfly to get behind him. Hawkeye couldn’t get a good angle where he wouldn’t harm Falcon with his arrow.

Much to Hawkeye’s horror, and Falcon’s shock, the butterfly managed to grab hold of one of Falcon’s wings and rip it off. The butterfly flew off with the wing, leaving Falcon tumbling through the air.

Hawkeye couldn’t help. He knew that Falcon was too low for his parachute to deploy sufficiently to save him from death. He knew that War Machine was too far away to reach Falcon in time. Thor was too far away to do anything to help.

All that Hawkeye could do was watch as his ally, his comrade, his friend fell to his doom.

And fall the Falcon did. But not to the ground. He fell about five metres, before he landed on a net…

No, Hawkeye focused more carefully, it was a web.

Had they missed a spider creeping through with the butterflies?

A movement in the corner of his eye turned his gaze. And Hawkeye relaxed.

It was a spider alright.

But from Earth.

Spiderman dashed across his web to help Falcon up.

"I'm alright." Falcon's voice came the coms, "But the butterflies just tried to kill me. They really are man-eaters, Cap?"

"No," A new voice replied, "Not really."

Hawkeye quickly realized that Spiderman was close enough to the microphone on the coms to be heard, but probably not close enough to hear.

"I saw them." Captain America pointed out, "They were all gathered around a dead woman."

"Butterflies don't eat." Spiderman countered.

Okay, so he *could* hear them. Chalk up enhanced hearing onto Spiderman's list of attributes.

"They drink." Spiderman continued, "And while common belief is that they only drink nectar, the truth is they will drink from any liquid that will provide them will the

nutrients they require. Decomposing dead animals can be utilised. I would theorise that as these butterflies are actually large enough *to* kill that they don't need to wait for something to die in order to drink. Also they, most likely, are gaining their nutrients from blood. It isn't uncommon; some species of moth drink blood, including humans'. Though butterflies are generally believed to be limited to tears and sweat from animals until after their death, in this case they would likely need a larger source and are turning to the one liquid that humans have in plenty, which they can easily access."

"Okay," War Machine breathed, "Who is on the comms? Because that was probably one of *the* most disturbing biology lessons I've ever had. And you guys *know* the people I had in my classes."

"Spiderman." Hawkeye supplied, "He just stopped Falcon from going splat, so I think we owe the guy to listen to him. Spiderman, do you know anything about what is going on? Or, more importantly, how to stop it?"

"I've been working on triangulating the signal." Spiderman shrugged, "But I got more than a little distracted by the killer butterflies. What about you?"

"Not getting any closer." War Machine sighed, "I'm on containment."

"I'll get Falcon down and go from there." Spiderman declared, "This is *not* how I wanted to spend my afternoon."

"Join the club, kid." Hawkeye snorted.

From what little Hawkeye had heard Spiderman say and from what he had heard *of* the vigilante, Hawkeye was seriously starting to like the kid. And he *had* to be a kid, the voice sounded too young to be an adult, but too old to be pre-teen.

Spiderman also was as good as his word; he quickly lowered Falcon to the ground on one of his webs and then swung off.

Hawkeye tried his best to keep an eye on the young superhero. But having not worked with him before was finding it hard to predict his movement paths. Although he was quickly adapting. The arcs that Spiderman followed were strangely similar to what he remembered the flyers at the circus using.

He had to admit, the kid had an undeniable grace that probably made him the envy of most flyers. Though there were points where Spiderman could improve. However he was clearly enjoying himself, so that more than made up for the minor technical faults that Hawkeye could spot.

But Hawkeye couldn't afford to spare the time to think about Spiderman's skills. He had to keep his mind on the fight.

Fortunately not long later he heard a triumphant cry from the Captain.

"Found it!" Hawkeye felt some of the tension release from his shoulders.

However there was a pregnant pause, where the portal didn't turn off.

"Umm," Captain America breathed, "There's no on-off switch."

"Just shoot the thing!" The Black Widow yelled.

"Verily, Captain," Thor put in, "Destroying the device is the best option."

"NO!" War Machine yelled.

But there was a strange echo in the word. Which was momentarily explained.

"Some of these things have fail-safes." Spiderman declared, "Shoot it and it won't go off. It might even increase the portal size. Give it here."

"Do you know what you are doing?" Hawkeye asked, certain that Spiderman would be sufficiently in range of the Captain's comm unit to hear him.

"I hang out with Johnny sometimes," Spiderman explained, "Last couple of times Reed needed someone to hold something in his lab. I got volun-told. And if you've spent any time in Reed's lab, you'll know that he explains to everyone who sets foot in there what he's up to. I managed to follow enough of his babble to learn how to turn these things off. Just give me a moment. Doom likes to change things around each time."

Hawkeye half listened to the mutterings that came through the earpiece. It was clear that Captain America was peering over Spiderman's shoulders to watch, by the clarity of the sound. However it was also clear that Spiderman wasn't really talking to anyone other than

himself. The half vocalized utterings made absolutely no sense at all were barely audible to Hawkeye anyway.

But they seemed to do the job as less than two minutes later the portal closed.

"And now, clean up." Spiderman sighed.

"Easy, kid." Captain America countered, "You're injured. Let us get it."

Injured? Hawkeye raised an eyebrow, even as he took down another butterfly. Only about a dozen or so left.

How badly damaged was the kid that it was obvious? And how had he gotten damaged.

"I've had worse and carried on." Spiderman retorted hotly, "I can still help."

"You've done enough." The Captain's voice carried the trace of his smile, "Let us pick up the rest of the mess. Besides, I figure that the last few times you've been worse off and carried on, you were on your own… You're not alone now."

"I'm always alone." Spiderman muttered.

And didn't that just make Hawkeye's heart break a little? Because he could *hear* it in Spiderman's voice. The same loneliness, the same emptiness, the same despair that had once coloured Tony's voice. It brought back to Hawkeye's mind the time Clint had first entered Tony's hidden and learnt about the Arc Reactor.

It wasn't as bad. It wasn't as coloured by pain and loss. But it was there.

A kid that shone as brightly as Spiderman did for Hawkeye should not have that sort of pain in him. He should not believe he was alone.

“I want Spiderman to join the Avengers.” Rogers declared at the debrief.

“Unfortunately not possible,” Agent Coulson replied, “He does not have the training for SHIELD. Nor would the World Security Council allow us to recruit someone such as him. He is closer to a vigilante than a hero, by their definition.”

“I’m not asking for him to join SHIELD.” Rogers countered, “I want him to join the Avengers. Being part of SHIELD is not necessary to be part of the Avengers. Otherwise we wouldn’t have Thor and Doctor Banner. Nor would we have Colonel Rhodes.”

“I agree with Rogers.” Barton put in, “He’s good. Good at what he does. And means good. It’s there in his voice and in his actions. I vote yes.”

“Verily,” Thor rumbled, “The young warrior is skilled and would be a welcome addition to our alliance.”

“I don’t know much about him.” Doctor Banner added, “But from what flashes I’ve gotten from the Other Guy, he likes the ‘Little Spider’. His vote is yes, mine is undetermined.”

Barton blinked in surprise. He would have thought that the Hulk wouldn’t have noticed the tiny hero.

“I would feel more comfortable with him as part of the Avengers than not.” Romanov stated.

“Kid saved my life.” Wilson leant back in his chair, “I’m for it.”

“I’d like to hear the Captain’s reasoning,” Colonel Rhodes shrugged, “But I have no objection.”

“Why?” Coulson’s question was directed at the Captain.

“We need a scientific mind in the field.” Rogers shrugged, “And don’t say we’ve got Rhodes. Because we’ve only got him when he’s not with the Air Force. We can’t put the fate of the world on the chance that he’ll be available to us when we need him. And we don’t always have the time to talk the Hulk down so that Doctor Banner can look at our problem and give us a solution. He’s quick. He’s smart. And he can fight. Plus, from what I’ve heard he’s not associated with any other team in particular. He’s a kid, fighting an adult’s war. We can’t stop him. But I don’t want him fighting out there alone. Not like he is.”

“You can’t be certain he’s that smart.” Coulson reminded, “He could have just been told what to do by Doctor Richards on a previous occasion and remembered the instructions.”

"Unlikely," Rhodes snorted, "You ever been in Reed's lab, Agent?"

"No." Coulson conceded, "I presume you have?"

"More than a few times," Rhodes nodded, "If you've ever talked to Reed you'll know he's smart. *Very* smart. He's got an intellect that only a few in the world can compete with. And outside of his lab it shows. But he's able to communicate his ideas. He can dumb them down to a level which although it is often over most people's heads it is sufficiently *low* enough that they can get the gist. You don't want him to dumb it down further, because he only does *that* when he's being patronising. Or snarky. In his lab… He doesn't bother dumbing it down. Not even a little bit. He talks science; at a high level; very, very quickly. He makes it accessible for three people and *only* three people. Sue, Ben and Johnny. And he doesn't always do it for Johnny. Not if the hothead has annoyed him recently. Me? I usually understand about a third of what comes out his mouth in the labs."

"You went to MIT." Coulson challenged.

"Engineering Physics." Rhodes countered, "I was Engineering Physics. That means I am, to all intents and purposes for this discussion, an Applied Physicist. Reed's a Theoretical Physicist with occasional dabbling in Experimental Physics. And as the old joke goes: Applied Physicists are from Venus; Theoretical Physicists wonder why it spins in the opposite direction."

"Seriously?" Barton couldn't stop the word from coming out of his mouth.

Glancing around the table, he could see the confusion on Thor's face; the laughing smile that Banner was trying to restrain; the slight bafflement in Romanov's eyes; the more than slightly shell-shocked blink that Coulson gave; and Roger's tiny smile at Rhodes' words.

"Well," Rhodes shrugged, "Tony says it's an old joke."

"How much of Richards does Tony understand?" Romanov queried.

"All of it." Rhodes replied, "He always was far, far better than me. He's Applied Physics, Engineering Physics, Theoretical Physics… But he far prefers Mechanical Engineering. He can destroy a building, or tell you how to build it. His true love though…"

"Is his robotics." Rogers finished, "You can always tell. He loves his AIs. They're like his children… No, they *are* his children."

"How does my Lady Jane fit into this description of Physicists?" Thor frowned.

"Astrophysicists," Rhodes stated quickly, "Whole different ball game. But generally they would be classed as Observational Physics and/or Theoretical."

"So she would be able to understand the Doctor Richards?" Thor pressed.

“Far better than me,” Rhodes agreed, “It helps that her field of study overlaps with Reeds’ fields… Look, we’re going off topic. The report from the Science Department is that the Portal Device had a different layout to all the previous ones. Spiderman *couldn’t* have simply learned by rote how to disable it.”

“I have yet to receive the report.” Coulson frowned.

“It was e-mailed to you about two minutes ago.” Rhodes shrugged, “I got my own copy and just read it.”

“You get e-mail in that thing?” Wilson blinked.

“I get *Skype* in this thing.” Rhodes returned, “Along with a whole lot of other stuff. Tony tricked this thing out. Anyway, that tells me that Spiderman is smart. He’s intelligent. I’m not saying that he’s smarter than me. But he’s more intelligent. At least I’d bet so.”

“You’ve lost me.” Wilson was puzzled, “Smart and intelligent? Aren’t they just the same?”

“No.” Rhodes shook his head, “I’m smarter. I know more. Intelligent? Spiderman’s *capable* of knowing more. I’ve simply had more education. He can do more with he’s got already. Besides… I have a thing against kids fighting wars. And that’s what he’s doing. He’s fighting a war against crime. Every day. It’s not the big stuff usually. It’s the little stuff. The stuff that wears you down. And I don’t want a kid out there on his own. He’s got nobody. So I reckon he oughta have us.”

“He’s a mutant.” Coulson countered, “He has the X-Men.”

“Actually he isn’t.” Romanov spoke up, “I checked. Professor Xavier has categorically stated that Spiderman is not a Mutant. He doesn’t know the source of Spiderman’s powers, only that they are not genetic.”

“And the Fantastic Four are a family only business.” Rogers reminded, “He might be friends with them, but he’s not one of them. We have a soldier out there fighting on his own. And he’s going to get himself killed if he doesn’t get help. I don’t want that on my conscious.”

“Nor do I.” Coulson sighed, “Okay. I’ll sort out the paperwork. But he is *only* part of the Avengers. Not SHIELD. Where possible try to keep him out of SHIELD bases, unless you’re fighting Iron Man again. One of you find Spiderman, get him to sign some basic confidentiality agreements about SHIELD’s involvement in the Avengers. Apart from that… You tell him what you want to tell him. Work out how this arrangement is going to work. I am *not* going to do *that* for you.”

A lie. A bold-faced lie. Barton knew that Coulson wouldn’t be satisfied until he had the arrangement sorted out in black and white. For all that Coulson played the virtually

emotionless Agent he had a huge soft spot. Particularly for children and heroes (And his boyfriend, but Barton wasn't going to think about that one right then).

Barton knew that Coulson would take one look at whatever the Avengers came up with and would sigh and replace it with something up to his standard. So Barton would hash out something quickly, get Rogers to type it up and sign it. Then pretend that it was a serious attempt. It would save time all around.

Time which would be spent trying to hunt down one wall-crawling superhero in order to get him to join up with the Avengers.

123456789

It took a week before the casual patrolling the Avengers had instigated found Spiderman.

It would later worry Hawkeye that it took so little effort to persuade the vigilante to come home with them.

It took even less to talk him into joining up with them. Hawkeye reckoned the kid was getting close to burned out and knew it. So tossing him a line meant that it was going to be gratefully received.

"I won't take off my mask." Spiderman declared, "I'm not going to tell you who I am. Not yet. I've got people to protect."

The "yet" gave Hawkeye hope. They simply had to earn Spiderman's trust. And the first step in establishing trust was to give it.

Hawkeye removed his mask. Clint ran his hand through his hair.

“I get it, kid.” Clint shrugged, “You’ve got people. I’ve got people. When you’re ready. But your people? They’re now *my* people. So if you’re looking out for someone. So am I. Clint Barton, your friendly neighbourhood archer.”

The snigger that came from Spiderman was totally worth it.

After quick glances and shrugs the rest of the Avengers that wore masks revealed their faces. The introductions were short, but nonetheless heartfelt. Spiderman was presented with a comm unit for battles and missions (though Clint doubted he would ever be called upon for missions). Also a device to call for help, should he ever require support.

Clint hoped it would never be used. Not that he wouldn’t go to the kid’s aid, because he *would*, no second thoughts. *Nothing*! But because he didn’t want the kid to be in a situation so bad that he would need the help.

Chapter 31: Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas everyone!

"Remind me again why I'm here?" Clint asked Tony, as he tried not to fiddle with his shirt collar and bowtie.

"Because I can't avoid this event." Tony managed to look completely at ease in the formal attire. Almost as if he had been born in a suit.

Clint wondered exactly how old Tony had been when he had been fitted for his first tailored suit.

"And that means I have to be here because?" Clint managed to refrain from swearing, he didn't think it would go down all too well amongst the party guests.

"You can swear if you want, pest," Tony smirked, "They're used to much worse from me. You have to be here, because I got a Plus-One on my invite. And if you get that its social *suicide* not to bring someone."

"You could have taken Pepper." Clint suggested.

"She got an invite of her own." Tony shrugged, "So I couldn't. I was going to bring Steve. But he got that job last minute. As usual."

"You know Steve wouldn't go if he didn't have to." Clint immediately defended his friend.

"I know." Tony sighed, "I just sometimes wish that our work didn't get in the way of so much of our lives. And, *yes*, I know I'm just as much to blame as he is. If not more so. But I can wish, can't I?"

"You could *do* something about it." Clint reminded, "Take a step or two back. The world won't fall apart just because you take a few days longer to develop something revolutionary. You're still operating faster than pretty everyone else in the business. I've heard the complaints about how fast you work from the R&D floors."

"You go down there?" Tony blinked in surprise.

“I’ve made friends with one of your Interns.” Clint took a sip of his drink, “I go down to talk to him.”

“Peter, right?” Tony pressed gently, “Hey, I’m not blind. The kid needs someone like you. Someone who’s more like a big brother than anything else. I get the feeling he’s been on the outside of everything most of his life. Too geeky to play with the cool kids. Too young to socialise with his intellectual peers. And not enough money to close the gap.”

“That’s why you took him on.” Clint realized, “You saw a bit of yourself in him. You didn’t want him walking the path you almost took.”

“You, my friend,” Tony pointed his glass at Clint, “Are dangerously perceptive. But don’t tell Peter, I’d rather he not realize my cunning plan. Or that I’m technically overpaying him and giving him far too few duties and far too much time to work on his own projects.”

“You, Tony Stark,” Clint smirked, “Have far too big a heart.”

“Shhh.” Tony held a finger to his lips, “Don’t let anyone know. It’s a secret. Have to keep the arsehole image up. It comes in handy sometimes.”

“What is this whole thing about anyway?” Clint frowned, “I don’t think I got it in the whirlwind of you dragging me here.”

Clint knew that he had been the only person available in the Tower. He’d sprained his wrist in a bad fall during the last mission. He still had the support for it on. But still, Tony had known about the party for at least two weeks, and Steve had been gone for four days.

“I was hoping that Steve would make it back in time.” Tony shrugged, “But he didn’t. This is a celebration for Henry Pym’s winning of the Wolf Prize for Chemistry. He has created a gas that temporarily provides limited immunity to radioactivity, under specific circumstances. A rather fascinating discovery.”

“And that is important because?” Clint frowned, “I mean I know how that could be useful. But it is only under specific circumstances. So it should have a fairly limited application. Why is the Wolf Prize so important?”

“The Wolf Prize is usually a good indicator of who will win the Nobel Prize the next year.” Tony stated, “So most people believe that Hank will be in Stockholm come next December.”

“And you?” Clint asked.

“I’m not sure.” Tony replied, “I can see how it could be useful, but I also believe that it has too limited a scope to be properly utilized in its present form. I think there is a lot more work to be done on it. Honestly I don’t think it’s at the right stage to be awarded this. But the

political climate and the need for something like this… People want hope. And I didn't get a say in this."

Tony finished his glass. Clint knew it was only a mixture of lemonade and apple juice (he was drinking the same himself), but it did look convincingly like champagne. Probably due to the exact ratio of apple juice to lemonade, which Tony had discussed in detail with one of the waiters almost the moment he had arrived at the event.

"Anthony Stark!" The voice was smiling and so was the speaker, "Emerged from your long seclusion at last have you? You look great."

"Aldrich Killian," Tony greeted calmly, "You look… You look good."

"Here," Aldrich snagged a glass from a waiter and presented it to Tony, "You could do with a refill."

Tony elegantly placed his glass on a passing waiter's tray and accepted the new glass. However Clint noticed that Tony didn't even think about drinking from it, he merely used the glass as a prop.

"And is this your husband?" Killian didn't even bother talking to Clint.

That didn't sit right with the archer. In fact there was something decidedly *off* about Killian, in Clint's mind. He wasn't sure what it was. Whether he was picking up on the vibes of distrust and dislike that Tony was giving off or whether it was just something about the man himself, Clint wasn't sure. But he knew for a fact that he didn't like Killian from his blond, elegantly coiffured hair right down to his shinny shoes.

Clint longed to pull Tony away from the man. To wrap Tony up in a protective layer against whatever malice he expected to come from Killian.

But he couldn't.

“No,” Tony smiled as he answered the question, “Unfortunately Steve was called away on business. This is Clint. One of my best friends. He agreed to accompany me tonight.”

“You let your husband work such unsociable hours?” Killian almost challenged, “He needs to work at all?”

“Financially?” Tony smirked, “No, he doesn’t. But nor do I. I still work though. Because I have to. Because I have all these thoughts in my brain that I have to get out somehow. Anyhow. I work, because I enjoy it. So does he. If I took away what he enjoyed, he would not be the man I love. If that means he has to run out on me for various jobs… Well, I’ve done worse for less.”

“Speaking of work,” Killian almost leered, “Have you had a chance to look at my proposal? I’ve sent it to your company several times, but I believe it has gotten mislaid by your secretary… Oh, I mean your Vice CEO. No doubt if you look at it, you will understand the sheer *potential* it has.”

“Aldrich,” Tony sighed, “I have read your proposal. I agree with you, it has a great deal of potential. But I do not believe it is best suited to the direction that Stark Industries is going at this time. I cannot in good conscious commit to it. I would advise you to look for a partnership with a different company.”

“No,” Killian shook his head, “It *has* to be Stark Industries. It has to be *you*. You are the only person, apart from myself, with the *vision* to take this project forward correctly. Think of the good we could do together, Anthony.”

“My decision is final,” Tony’s voice grew cold, “Besides this is neither the place nor the time for this discussion. I believe I see a friend. Perhaps I’ll see you around later.”

Tony strode away; Clint following, careful to place himself between Tony and Killian. He knew that he was not just imagining the waves of malice that flowed from Killian towards Tony. However he *hoped* that he was imagining the feeling of lust that he thought he could sense.

“Clint,” Tony murmured, “Do me a favour?”

“Anything.” Clint replied without needing to think about it.

“Do not, under any circumstances, allow me to get cornered by him alone this evening?” Tony asked.

“This evening or ever.” Clint returned, “What was that all about? Who is he?”

“I’ll explain later.” Tony sighed, “I promise… Just… Just not now. And don’t let *her* corner me either.”

He pointed towards a rather beautiful brunette.

"And she is?" Clint asked.

"Maya Hansen," Tony supplied, "Killian's right hand woman as far as I can tell. She also wants me on board with the project. And she might try as well. She has what she might believe is an 'in' with me."

"Because?" Clint pressed.

"I took her to my room once." Tony shrugged, "Never slept with her though. Still she always claims I did. Suppose it's better than admitting that I slipped out to work on something."

Clint merely nodded in reply. He had a million questions. But none of the time to ask them right then. He simply made a note of the name and the face for future research.

He also decided that he would keep Tony in his sights all evening. The better to keep him safe and protected from the sharks that swam in the pool. Who knew there were so many dangers at a social event?

Well, besides all the ones that Clint had catalogued before he got there. He hadn't thought that the security checked *guests* could be as big a threat (if not bigger) than criminals or terrorists.

"Hank! Hope!" Tony smiled broadly as he approached one couple, "How are you both? Congratulations Hank."

Clint noticed the disparate ages, and the slight resemblance between the two. Clearly related. Possibly a father and daughter.

"Tony!" The woman returned the smile and pulled him into a hug, kissing him on both cheeks with enthusiasm. Before repeating the actions on Clint, "And who is this

handsome creature? Don't think I don't notice your handiwork here, Tony. Your tailor has a particular style when he's working on your commissions."

"A little much, Hope?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Stamping him with a brand that reads 'Stark Property' might have been more subtle," Hope retorted with a laugh, "At least to those of us knowledgeable about fashion."

"Speaking of," Tony sighed, "I've been an ass to Pepper again. What is the latest thing in fashion that you think she'll like for an apology? I'm hoping you take after your mother in that respect."

"I'll send you a link," Hope declared, "Seeing as how you know just enough about fashion to be dangerous. Thank *god* you listen to your tailor. You always have had an innate knowledge about what suits *you*. And can identify the major brands. But when it comes to the more subtle details… You're just like most men."

"I feel I should be insulted." Tony grinned, "It's good to see you, Hope."

"You too, Tony." Hope almost whispered, "These parties haven't been the same without you. Not as much fun."

"I'm still recovering." Tony shrugged, "I prefer quieter parties these days. Just a handful or so of people. This is Clint, by the way. One of my best friends. Clint, this is Hope Van Dyne. The silent gentleman beside her is the person for whom this bash is being held, her father, Doctor Hank Pym."

"Do I detect a note of envy, Stark?" Pym almost challenged.

"I don't think your research is at the point where this is all that appropriate." Tony countered, "Your gas isn't yet formulated to the point where it can be used in Japan or even Chernobyl. It's a brilliant invention. But it doesn't yet have applications for the real world. You will get there. I have no doubt about that. But this feels a bit premature."

"I'll concede that it isn't fully applicable to the situations outside of the lab; however you have to admit in laboratory conditions there are a multitude of uses." Pym reminded, "With time I will develop it to have more real world applications."

"Have you considered collaborating with Doctor Banner?" Tony asked, "He is one of the foremost experts on Gamma Radiation."

"I had considered consulting him previously," Pym shrugged, "However you have to admit things are different now."

"Why?" Tony looked confused.

"The Hulk." Pym declared firmly.

"Is a softy," Tony retaliated calmly, "Look, he's never come out around me. And I don't exactly encourage a supportive and calm working environment. At least, not in my

personal labs, which is where he usually spends his time. If *I* can't trigger him. You can't. Besides, the Hulk isn't someone to fear."

"It is a monster with no conscious, Stark." Pym fired back.

"No," Tony smiled, "And I'm sorry you can't see that. He could really be of benefit to your research, but that is your loss. Not his."

Tony nodded his head and moved off. Not even bothering to say goodbye.

Clint was trying to find a tactful way of pointing out to Tony that he was being more than slightly abrasive. In the end he just gave up.

"Was that really the best thing to say?" Clint blurted out, "I mean, I know you've got a reputation as an asshole. But that was a little extreme for this sort of event."

"Clint," Tony grinned, "I've said worse. I've done worse. Trust me, that little thing? It won't be a blip on Hank's radar tomorrow. Probably not even in an hour's time. Besides, he knows I'm right. That's what *really* is getting to him. The fact that I'm right and he's wrong. That he'll *need* Brucie-bear's help if he wants to get the project anywhere fast. He might be able to do it on his own. But it won't go anywhere *near* as fast as it would with help. Add in the fact that his research money is in the form of a grant from the DoD…"

"And they aren't too fond of Bruce right now." Clint breathed, "Then why suggest it?"

"Because if I can get the scientific community thinking of collaborating with Bruce again," Tony shrugged, "It'll get him back into the field that much quicker. It'll restore his reputation and resolve a lot of his inadequacy issues. Besides, he's got such a brilliant mind, it's a shame to waste it… Speaking of minds, I see one."

And Tony was off again. Clint tagging along. He was starting to feel that this was more of a bodyguard mission than simply accompanying a friend. Certainly Tony was riling enough people up.

But it was more than that. Clint had seen the looks Tony had been getting. Heard (or at least lip-read) the mutterings that Tony shouldn't be there. That Tony didn't belong. Why was the Merchant of Death at a celebration like this?

Clint could tell that most of the malice came from those with far less wealth and/or intelligence than Tony. It seemed that for all of Tony's partying in the past, he'd been careful to avoid the jealous… Or rather the maliciously jealous. Rather than the just plain envious jealous.

"Charles!" Tony greeted a man in a wheelchair.

"Anthony." The man smiled in reply.

Professor Xavier, Clint's mind supplied, telepath. Mind reader. Don't think of pink elephants.

"It's Tony." Tony corrected immediately, "How are you doing? You up for letting me make you a hoverchair?"

"I am happy with what I have at present." Xavier replied, "How are you? I was surprised to hear of your nuptials."

"So were most people." Tony grinned, "That was kinda the point. I nearly got to the first year anniversary before the public found out. I consider that an achievement."

"True enough." Xavier agreed, "You have done well with your company since you reclaimed it back. My congratulations to you. I always knew that you had potential beyond what you were allowing the world to see."

"More like what the world *wanted* to see." Tony retorted, "This is Clint, by the way. A good friend."

"I can see," Xavier smiled, "Though he's a little bit of a minnow amongst sharks here. You should have prepared him better."

"And what if I like him the way he is?" Tony challenged, "Untouched by the malice and the backstabbing and the lies. Oh gods, the *liars*. The worst of the worst. Hiding everything behind lies and more lies. And I am the King of the Liars. The Worst of all Deceivers."

"No, you're not." Clint butted in, "You are not a liar. You are not a deceiver. You are good and honest and true. You have a heart, for all you try to hide it. And I can get why you hide it. Because it is so *big* that people would destroy you with it. You care. You care so *much* for so many. You are a good man. And I don't think enough people have ever told you that."

"He's right, Anthony." Xavier agreed, "You are a good man. And that is why you feel so much betrayal when people hurt you. You trust those you love with everything you are. It is not a bad thing. It is a good thing. A very good thing. If more people loved and treasured the things that you truly love and cherish, the world would be a merrier place."

“What?” Tony raised an eyebrow, “Food and cheer and song above hoarded gold? I don’t think so Charles. Get Hank to give me a call. I’m sure Bruce would appreciate his insight into genetics. Certainly they’d produce a paper I’d like to read.”

Tony turned and walked away. Cling was torn between following him, and staying long enough to make sure that Professor Xavier knew how he felt about the hurting of Tony.

“No,” Xavier closed his eyes, almost in sorrow or grief, “Friends and family. Love and loyalty. Peace and protection. You are a far more broken man, than you let on Antony.”

Half of Clint bristled with anger. Half of him agreed with Xavier’s assessment. All the while his brain kept trying to keep Xavier from poking into his mind.

“Clint,” Xavier turned to the archer, “I am a telepath. However I am also a man with a conscious and a moral code. As a rule I do not go nosing about in other people’s heads, unless I believe that a person’s life is at risk. That being said, I cannot help what I hear shouted from people’s minds. Like a yelled argument that you pass in the street. Would you mind stopping trying not to think about pink elephants?”

Clint couldn’t help the slight blush that graced his cheeks, even as he turned to follow after Tony.

“Hank?” Clint asked, “You asked him to call earlier.”

“McCoy,” Tony explained, “Not Pym. Different Hank. Specialist in Genetics.”

“Bruce would be interested in collaborating there.” Clint agreed, “I didn’t know you knew Professor Xavier.”

“Passing acquaintance,” Tony shrugged, “He was friends with Howard. A relationship Stane disapproved of. But Howard thought that Charles could find Captain America. Thought mutants could help in his search. Not that it was any use. Xavier couldn’t sense Captain America’s thoughts. And none were willing to go searching. Not willing to reveal their abilities. They were… Not so bold about it then.”

“You disapprove?” Clint knew they had never discussed mutants.

“Not of that.” Tony replied, “Never of that. No one should have to hide who they are. They shouldn’t have to lie to the world. No… What I dislike… Is the arrogance.”

“Arrogance?” Clint blinked in surprise.

“Homo Superior.” Tony stated, “That’s arrogance. They are distinguishing themselves as a different species from humans. And worse, claiming that they are better than us. In their very name. Yet they aren’t better than us. They are the same. And they aren’t a different species. They are Homo Sapiens, just like us.”

“No.” Clint shook his head, “Everyone agrees they’re a different species.”

“The definition of a species is a group of living organisms consisting of similar individuals capable of exchanging genes or interbreeding producing fertile offspring.” Tony almost recited, “A mutant can have fertile children with a human. Therefore we are the same species. Just with differences. A mutation is no different than having green eyes.”

And Tony strode off again. Once more leaving Clint wondering. His million questions were rapidly becoming billions. Yet he knew he could not ask them all of Tony. For some would reveal knowledge that he was not meant to have. But the questions would still haunt him.

An imposing figure stepped into Tony’s path. Clint immediately recognised him as a known threat.

But not one towards Tony.

“Stark.” Ross frowned down at the smaller, slighter man.

“General Ross,” Tony half-smiled back, “I had not known you would be here. This is not your preferred venue or event.”

“Your little red-head wouldn’t let me see you.” Ross declared, “She also insists that SI won’t help m… The Military.”

“Good to know that Pepper looks out for me,” Tony retorted, “I told her I didn’t want to talk to you. And SI will help the military.”

“Then you can produce the weapons I need.”

“We do not produce weapons anymore.” Tony corrected, “However we do a very good line in communication equipment. I think that is a line you should be interested in. You don’t seem to get most of the signals people keep sending you.”

"You *will* hand over the Monster."

"I don't know what you mean."

"The Hulk." Ross snarled, "You will hand it over to me."

"No." Tony's eyes hardened beneath his shades.

"You do not know what you are dealing with."

"I think I know better than you." Tony challenged, "Doctor Banner is a genius, not only in his field, but easily able to adapt to other fields of science. I consider myself honoured to count him amongst my friends. Something I do not classify you as, General."

Clint didn't bother smothering the grin that Tony's voice brought to his face. Somehow the Industrialist managed to make the word "General" sound like the scum that Tony had scrapped off the bottom of his shoe.

"You will regret it when that Monster turns on you." Ross sneered, "And turn it will. It will destroy you and all those you love. You are simply blind to what will happen. And when it happens you will make me weapons to deal with it."

"No." Tony narrowed his gaze, "You will not get any more Hulk-Buster technology from me. And Pepper will not condone such actions either."

"You will change your tune when the Monster comes out." Ross was firm, "When he hurts you and those you care for."

"Oh you have *no* idea," Tony snapped, "He already is a thorn in my side. I mean he's doing things that I *completely* disagree with. And he is *totally* unreasonable about it. His instance that I get three proper meals a day? I don't get it. I survive on coffee, smoothies and doughnuts. And the occasional Chinese takeaway or pizza. He just doesn't *get* it. He demands that I have a proper breakfast and supper… Not in my lab, if I can just point that out… He wants me to sit at a *table* in the *kitchen* at the very *least*! *And* he brings me a sort of packed lunch each day. And makes sure I eat it.

"Then there's his *absolutely* irrational idea that I should get at *least* seven hours of sleep a night. He's even got my *husband* involved in that one. Steve actually comes into my lab and when he knows I'm at a safe point to leave, picks me up and literally *carries* me to the bedroom, if I haven't left for a couple of days on my own. Then he won't let me leave until morning. You know its lucky Steve is an early riser, otherwise I wouldn't get *half* the work done I do. Don't either of them *get* it? I haven't had a full night's sleep in *years*. That's the *point*! I work for days without sleep if I've got a spark of inspiration. I'll work until I drop from exhaustion. I quite enjoy my spurts of blackout engineering. Reverse engineering

that shit is *really* good fun. I cat nap. Bursts of sleep. An hour here. Two there. Thirty minutes when I need it. Why do I need seven hours? Haven't had that since I started MIT.

"Then there's the *ludicrous* idea that I need to have all of my injuries checked by someone… If they're over a stupidly low level of seriousness. I mean I've worked with a broken arm before. Why do I need someone to check it? I know how to deal with it. I know how to deal with anything I could do to myself in the lab. I don't need to get my boo-boos checked out. But Bruce insists. And Steve enforces it."

Clint was barely able to restrain his laughter. It wasn't just Tony's words (which were a hundred percent true, he'd *seen* Steve carry Tony away from the lab). But the faces of Ross' sycophants were brilliant. And the General was going more and more purple with every word out of Tony's mouth.

Then the atmosphere changed.

Clint saw it before Tony did. He moved without thinking.

He caught Ross' hand as it came down to strike Tony.

"You don't touch Mister Stark." Clint declared.

"Get your bodyguard to back off." Ross demanded, after he had failed to pull free from Clint's grip.

"He's not my bodyguard," Tony corrected, "He's my friend. He tells himself when to let go. And I don't think he's going to do so any time soon. Clint? It's Tony."

"Sorry, Tones." Clint shrugged, "Instinct. When I protect someone they don't usually like me being so personal."

"You're my friend." Tony reminded, "I'm not a client. Even if you do make a habit of going over my security system every month."

"I'm not going to let my best male friend live with poor security." Clint retorted, "Especially not one who has a good few enemies out there."

"Let me go!" Ross snarled at Clint, even as he kept tugging.

Clint released at exactly the right moment to cause Ross to fall to the ground.

"Attack dog." Ross sneered at Clint.

"A very effective one, actually." Tony grinned, "And he holds his own lead, so I wouldn't try anything. I can also state, with absolute certainty, that he can beat you in a fight."

Tony didn't look back as he strode away from Ross and his sycophants. He seemed to have no fear of an attack from them for his words. Whether that was because he trusted Clint to have his back or because he didn't believe Ross would dare such an overt act of violence in the current situation (the earlier attempted slap being an aberration), Clint didn't know. Nor did he particularly care. He didn't trust Ross, so he would keep watch.

However he was so busy focusing his attention on Ross and his bootlickers that he failed to see the next attack, slight though it was.

A blonde had approached Tony and tore his shades from his face.

"Miss Everhart," Tony calmly addressed her, "I believe those are mine."

"You won't even look me in the eye." She accused.

"And is that a crime?" He returned, "If so I was unaware. I freely confess to that crime."

"You deliberately excluded me from your last Press Conference. The *only* Press Conference you've given since the Iron Man incident."

"And the last time we spoke you triggered a PTSD episode that took me months to recover from." Tony countered, "I was not keen to re-enact such an event."

"You got me *fired*!"

"How? I have not concerned myself with your career. I have not spoken for or against you with any media outlet. As long as we never interacted again, I was happy."

“I was covering your therapist’s pregnancy when you came out as *gay*! I lost my *job* because of that.”

“My supposed therapist,” Tony corrected, “It’s not my fault that you failed to sufficiently check your facts or your sources. And I’m bisexual.”

“And this is your husband.” She pulled out a camera and let off the flash virtually in Tony’s face.

Clint saw it and was moving before he had consciously registered what he had seen. The camera was in his hands, the chip out and in his pocket, before he carelessly tossed it back to her. He also snatched Tony’s shades.

“I’m not his husband.” Clint declared as he put a gentle hand on Tony’s frozen face, “I’m his friend.”

“The Merchant of Death *has* no friends.” She sneered.

“He has me.” Clint returned, “Come on, Tones. Come back to me. I’ve got your back. It’s okay. You’re not there. You’re not there.”

“Flashback?” Everhart laughed, “I thought he was cured!”

“I am better.” Tony declared, “Thanks Clint. I am better than I was. And I think I’m done here.”

“Jealous?” Everhart challenged, “You’ll never win a Wolf Prize. Never mind a Nobel, which is what Pym will get next year. Merchant of Death you are. And so you will remain. Leopards don’t change their spots. That is, and always shall be your legacy.”

“And what will yours be?” Tony raised an eyebrow in response, “Merchant of Scandal and Muckraker? Or will you be forgotten before your corpse is cold? And I rather think that my legacy is yet to be written. The best years are yet to come, babe.”

Tony easily claimed his shades back from Clint and slipped them on. Then he turned and strode away.

“We leaving?” Clint murmured as he fell into step.

“Yes.” Tony replied, “I can’t take the butt-kissing and back-stabbing anymore.”

Chapter 32: Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Alright," Tony slumped back in the car, "Fire away."

"Killian." Clint didn't need to voice the question further.

"I first met him over a decade ago," Tony shrugged, "1999. He wanted me to join his think-tank. Back then he had bad hair, bad skin, bad teeth, bad breath, was scrawny and walked with a limp and a cane… *And* he was a massive fanboy."

"Of what?"

"Me." Tony replied, "That's what *really* put me off him. I could ignore the rest. If he had a smart enough mind. I don't go for looks in a business partner. He keeps asking me to joining him on a particular project. Project Extremis. I don't like the principle. It's too… It's too Project Rebirth for me."

"Project Rebirth?" Clint barely managed to control a gulp. Tony shouldn't know the Project name, it was still heavily classified.

"Yeah, the project that created Captain America," Tony explained, "Howard was part of it. And I know it's meant to be secret, classified and all that, but for God's sake it's in the fucking *comic* books. Not that I learnt about it from there. It was Howard's idea of a bedtime story. The rare times he actually bothered to talk to me."

"He's trying to create a Super-Soldier?" Clint focused on the main point of the conversation.

"He *claims*," Tony stressed the word, "That he wants to cure diseases and deformities and disabilities and injuries. But I don't like it. It relies on nanobots messing with bodies on a cellular level… And deeper. Messing with DNA itself. He thinks it could be used to cure cancer. Targeting the tumorous cells and strengthening the healthy cells. I just think it could be too easily confused. Could go all "Are you my Mummy?" on us."

"What?" Clint stared.

""Are you my Mummy?"" Tony frowned, ""The Empty Child" and "The Doctor Dances"? Doctor Who? Classic storyline. Brilliant episodes. You haven't seen it?"

"No." Clint shook his head.

"Watch it." Tony advised, "Suffice to say, not a good thing. It gives me the creeps. Especially with the way Killian wants me involved. He's all very, very stalkery. Or at least he would be, if he went that way."

“You’ve known Doctor Pym long?” Clint changed the topic. He would look more about Killian up later.

“Long enough,” Tony replied, “I remember him and Jan, Janet, his wife, from parties and social events when I was a child. Jan was… She was amazing.”

“She’s dead then?”

“Died when I was little.” Tony agreed, “Hank… Kinda started drawing away from the world after that. Quite bluntly I’m surprised that he was *this* party. Never mind with Hope. They’re barely on talking terms. She got him thrown out of his own company. Literally. She was the deciding vote on whether he got to stay. And she said he was to go.”

Clint stared in shock at that.

“Howard always said that Hank was a genius when it came to chemistry.” Tony smiled slightly, “But I always thought Jan was the smartest person around when I was a kid. Hope was channelling her back there. She’s not as much of an airhead as she was projecting. I think that’s just her method of coping with crowds… And a way of punishing Hank for not being there for her when she was growing up.”

“Why did you think Jan was so smart?” Clint asked.

“Jan told me a secret,” Tony closed his eyes, “She told me never to let anyone know how much I knew. She told me that I could make them think I knew less than I knew. Or more than I knew. But never to let them know how much I knew. Because if someone thinks you know more than you do… They’ll tell you things, because they think you already know them. And if you pretend to know less than you do, they’ll let things slip around you, because you don’t know enough to piece it all together. She told me to pick one and stick with it… Always. She picked pretending that she didn’t know as much as she did.”

“She played the airhead.” Clint realized.

“Yes,” Tony nodded, “She told me only to trust the people I trusted to protect everything I had with everything I knew. Then I’d never be betrayed. I should have listened better.”

And that was not a topic Clint wanted to dwell on.

“What about Xavier?” Clint changed the topic once more.

“Again,” Tony shrugged, “Old family friend, like I said. He knew Howard. And before you ask, I’m not worried about his mind-reading. He’s a good man. He wouldn’t do that. Besides, he’s used it on me once before. Told me it was like being in a TV shop with every screen on at full volume, but each showing a different station. He can’t deal with it easily. He doubts anyone could.”

That was a comfort to Clint, but not a complete one.

“What about Mind-Control?” Clint challenged.

“Never experienced,” Tony shrugged, “But I’m sure there would be noticeable tells. At least for the people who know me.”

“You don’t get on with Ross.” Clint changed topics again, sensing that he wouldn’t get much more information out of Tony about Xavier.

“Never have. Never will. But he’s not high enough or influential enough for me to worry about him.”

“And if he ever does become that?”

“If ever SI’s future depends upon that blaggard I’m in a worse situation that I ever imagined.” Tony was blunt.

“You alright after the flashback?” Clint knew the answer, but also knew that asking was needed.

“Yeah,” Tony smiled wanly, “Sorry, it was the camera flash. Usually I’ve got my shades on.”

“That why you wear them?” Clint asked.

“Here,” Tony held them out, “Pop them on.”

Confused Clint obeyed the instruction.

“Good evening, Master Clint.” Jarvis’ voice came out of nowhere.

“How the?” Clint blurted out, “There’s no *way* you made a computer small enough to fit in these things!”

“You are correct, Master Clint.” Jarvis agreed, “However I am not installed on the shades. The shades are linked to Sir’s phone wirelessly.”

“No one apart from the wearer can hear him.” Tony was rightfully smug in Clint’s opinion, “Jarvis can monitor where I’m looking and my pulse. Using both of those he knows when I’m about to zone. Then he can bring me out of it, before I’m in it fully.”

“He linked to your watch as well?” Clint asked, “To read your pulse?”

“No,” Tony shrugged, “Though that’s an idea. There’s a pulse point just in front of your ear. Sensors in the frame can read it from there.”

Clint slid the shades off, and raised his hand to the area Tony had described. It didn’t take him long to feel his own pulse.

“Ingenious,” Clint breathed, “You should look towards marketing this.”

“Who for?” Tony snorted, “I made it so I could cope. It’s a personal thing. It’s not something other people would want to use.”

“Sometimes I don’t get you.” Clint muttered, “You know Google are making things like this? Google-glass? But it’s still got issues. You could put them to shame with something like this.”

“I’ll think about it.” Tony shrugged noncommittally.

Clint frowned slightly.

“Tones,” Clint spoke gently, “What’s bothering you? Is it those comments about the Merchant of Death thing?”

He wasn’t Steve, but he knew when something was bothering Tony. And something was bothering him.

“In a way,” Tony sighed, “I object more to the fact that they all seem to think that *because* I was the Merchant of Death that I can’t win a Nobel Prize. It’s like they never bothered to learn their history.”

“In what way?” Clint was confused.

“What do you know about the Nobel Prize?” Tony countered, “Particularly the founding of it?”

“Not a lot.” Clint shrugged, “A man called Nobel. Alexander?”

“Alfred Nobel,” Tony countered, “He was the inventor of dynamite. The newspapers when announcing his death declared: “Le marchand de la mort est mort”. Or “The Merchant of Death is dead”. They laid the deaths of those killed by his creation at his feet.”

“They didn’t mention the Nobel Prize?”

“It wasn’t created then.” Tony explained, “They jumped the gun. It was his brother who had died. He was alive and read the papers. And thought “Is that my legacy?”. He invented dynamite to make things safer. Replacing nitroglycerin. It was others who turned it into weapons. Others who used it to kill. He decided to change his legacy. These days everyone knows about the Nobel Prize. But no-one remembers the dynamite.”

It wasn’t hard for Clint to understand why Tony clearly associated with Nobel. They certainly had a lot in common. Only Tony wasn’t throwing money at the problem of his image in the traditional manner. He was throwing his brain at the problem. Clint wasn’t oblivious to the number of medical and humanitarian inventions that Tony had created in the last year or so; even if it seemed that everyone else had. Though Clint thought that was more by their choice than by chance.

The world didn’t *want* to know about Tony Stark Philanthropist. But they enjoyed hearing about Tony Stark Merchant of Death and Tony Stark Playboy and Tony Stark Alcoholic.

And while the first two of those negative descriptions no longer applied, the third did. Clint knew better than most that alcoholism was never cured, even if alcohol was no longer consumed. It merely lay in wait for a moment of weakness and when that moment came (when and where Clint did not know, but he knew that it would) Clint would be there to drag Tony out of whatever bottle he lodged himself into.

123456789

“Barton.” Clint answered his phone automatically, “Hey Steve, you got the pizzas?”

“Clint,” Steve’s voice was tight, “Five men just tried to kidnap me.”

“What?” Clint nearly dropped his phone, “Who?”

“Tried to grab me,” Steve reiterated, “And I’m not sure who. I need someone to pick them up to find out.”

“I’ll sort it.” Clint declared.

“No.” Steve countered, “No, I’ll sit on them. I’ve phoned Phil. I need you to find Tony.”

“You think they wanted leverage?” Clint was already moving.

“There’s only one reason to grab Steve Stark.” Steve declared, “And that’s for leverage over Tony. Whether for money or inventions or worse.”

“You sure that they only know about that?” Clint checked.

“If they knew more,” Steve half-snorted, “They would have sent more men. And they would have grabbed Tony *first*. For leverage against *me*!”

“True,” Clint breathed, “I’ll find Tony. I know he’s not in his workshop. He’s probably on the R&D floors.”

“No,” Steve immediately refuted, “He’s got a meeting today. Pepper’s been at him for *weeks* about it.”

“Then he’s still in the building.” Clint relaxed slightly, “All Tony’s meetings are held here.”

“Not this one,” Steve was firm, “He had to go somewhere else. I was never told *where*. Ask Jarvis. Find him Clint, *please*!”

“On it!” Clint hung up.

“Jarvis,” Clint tilted his head slightly to address the ceiling, “Where is Tony?”

“Sir is currently en-route to a business meeting at the Japanese Embassy. If, as I anticipate you are, you are worried about his security, he is travelling with Mister Hogan and another bodyguard. I will, of course, pass your warning on to them.”

“Not to Tony.” Clint instructed, “Let’s not worry him until after the meeting. If he knows he’ll cancel the meeting. And I’d rather not have Pepper after my blood. Steve is fine. There’s no reason for Tony to worry right now.”

“Reluctantly I will have to agree with your assessment of the likely reaction of Miss Potts should this meeting not go ahead. Negotiations with the Japanese have not gone smoothly thus far.”

“The other bodyguard,” Clint frowned, “I didn’t know Tony had hired one.”

“Technically Mister Stevens is classified as one of the Security Personnel for this building, and Stark Industries in general.” Jarvis declared, “His loyalty to Sir however is unshakable. Technically Mister Hogan is still the only member of staff officially currently employed as Sir’s personal bodyguard, as well as chauffer, personal trainer and Head of SI Security. I have discretely informed Mister Hogan of the attack on Master Steve. He has reported that due to a car crash on their planned route they have had to utilise an alternative route to their destination. However Mister Hogan did not like the route the authorities were recommended, due to the slow traffic. As such he has chosen a route of his own devising and has arrived at the Embassy at this precise moment, according to the GPS. I have been assured by Mister Hogan that at no time will Sir be out of sight of one or other of the security personnel present.”

“Give me directions for the fastest route,” Clint instructed, “I’ll meet him there.”

But that was not to be. As Clint reached the Entrance Level of the Tower in the lift, he heard the sounds of gunfire. Immediately he slammed a hand against the stop button.

It took a while for Clint to force the lift door open, only to find that he had to force the door to the lobby open as well. It wasn’t helped by the fact that he wasn’t level with the door. The gunfire was still going on, making Clint’s actions more and more desperate. He was *not* going to let the security guards die on his watch. Clearly they were in over this head.

The only reason he hadn’t tried going out through the top hatch in the lift was that Tony had once mentioned that if the building went into lockdown, all lifts immediately either went to the bottom or the top of the lift-shaft they were in and stayed there, until cleared by security guards. The lift-hatch was sealed with electromagnets and wouldn’t open for anything.

Clint had managed to stop the lift moving, by hitting the override button, but that was only because he knew about the protocol. The doors weren’t sealed as tightly, because at the very top and bottom of the shafts there weren’t any doors on the other side, so it was impossible to leave the lift once in those locations… Unless you were Reed Richards and could slide through the very small gap.

Once Clint had both doors open enough he emerged into the lobby, with a rather undignified wriggle and slide motion that looked like he was drunk and getting out of a swimming pool.

Still lying on the floor, shifting his gun into his hand, Clint took in the room. A good dozen men had drawn weapons and were engaging in gunfire with the two security guards and three receptionists, whom Clint had always believed were more than the pretty faces that they appeared to be. And *yes*, Clint had checked the security systems monthly, but he'd only ever checked the camera and sensor placement (the hardware); Tony had declared that he trusted Happy to hire competent people and keep them well trained. Though he had allowed Clint to run secondary background checks on all personnel in the entire building.

However the security checks hadn't flagged up the janitor currently doing sterling work with his mop. That was Shinto Muso-ryu jojutsu if Clint had ever seen it (and he *had* in Budapest, don't ask).

The problem was that the invaders were armed with semi and automatic weapons, while the security personnel didn't have those. There was also the matter that Clint could see another dozen invaders gathered around the entrance, trying to get in through the shut and most probably locked doors.

Clint threw a knife into the fray before dashing to join the besieged security staff.

"Clint," One of them nodded at him, "If you need a gun, there's one next to Rebecca's station."

"I'm armed," Clint revealed his concealed gun, "I didn't know the receptionists were armed. Or that they were such good shots."

"Mister Stark insists on it." Rebecca declared, "Everyone thinks I got this job because I was a Cheerleader in College, nearly went Pro. And they're right. It was that level of fitness that got me the job."

"Mister Stark," Laura put in, "Puts us through an intensive training program. Just in case this happens. And if we don't make the grade in our yearly fitness reviews, we run the risk of being fired."

"There's more trying to get in." Gerald reminded.

"Good luck with that." Sophie snorted, "I hit the alert after the first shot. Those doors don't open until the deactivation code is used."

"Lifts and stairs are locked down as well." Clint added.

"All access in and out of the building is secured." Joseph put in, "And we are going to get these bastards. They killed Kenny."

That was a fact that Clint had been studiously ignoring. There were always three guards and two receptionists on duty, except on shift changes, when an extra receptionist was present and two extra guards. The shift changes were at different times, the receptionists changing at least an hour and a half before the guards. There never was any moment when there should have only been two guards on duty. Though Clint reckoned that he should adjust his mental count to there always being five guards with the new information he had just gained.

"Are there any other security features that Tony's neglected to let me know about?" Clint asked.

"Direct line to the Police." Gerald started to tick off, "They should be on their way. The other security guards on duty will be clearing each floor, before moving to back us up."

"We're basically running a Steranko system." Sophie put in.

"Leverage, right?" Clint recognised the reference, "God, Tony loves that show."

"This section is built like a fortress." Laura added, "So we can withstand a siege."

"We even have the food, drink and first aid supplies." Joseph didn't look up from where he was bandaging Rebecca's arm.

"Billy!" Gerald called out to the janitor, "Stop showing off and get in here! I don't want to accidently shoot you."

The janitor, who had somehow miraculously managed avoided being filled full of bullets, back-flipped into the receptionist's fortress. Clint blinked in surprise; hadn't thought such a move was possible with only one eye.

"What *are* you?" Clint blurted out, before he could think.

"Ninja." Billy replied, bowing in the Japanese fashion.

"Don't mind Billy." Rebecca stated, "He always insists he's a ninja. I think it entertains Mister Stark, so he ignores the eccentricity."

"That and he's damn effective." Sophie put in, "You do *not* want to be on the receiving end of one of his kicks."

Billy had armed himself with a gun, from the fingerprint locked safe, and joined in with the shooting.

Despite the generally jovial attitude the group had, it was clear that they were not making progress. The invaders clearly were hiding bulletproof vests under their clothing.

"What's the police's ETA?" Gerald asked.

"Too long." Billy declared, "That's a laser they're getting out."

Clint checked the admittedly limited security feed (during lockdown it only showed the display from the cameras directly outside the lobby and those inside it) and the group were getting something that looked dangerous out from the back of a van.

"How do you *know* that?" Rebecca demanded.

"I get to clean on the interesting floors." Billy shrugged, "Problem is that those glass panels… They won't take the power that that laser produces. Not for long."

"It's not glass." Gerald countered.

"Doesn't matter." Clint shook his head, "He's right. That laser will cut through that like frozen butter. Unless the NYPD gets here in ten minutes. They're going to have reinforcements."

"Then we'd better get rid of them quickly." Sophie declared, "Mister Stark would be very disappointed in us if we failed to maintain the security of our building. Let's get rid of the trash. Forget taking prisoners. Head shot ladies and gentlemen. Knees if you can. But otherwise I don't care. The rest of the guards won't get here in time. Their priority is securing the sensitive and dangerous material. Hunting season is open."

Ten minutes wasn't enough time. If Clint had had his bow he knew that he could have gotten the job done easily in that time. But he didn't.

Even with a gun he would have been capable, as much as he disliked using them. But he was mainly concentrating on not letting the civilians, which for all his competence they still were, get killed.

And it didn't even take ten minutes before the reinforcements (for the wrong side!) had cut their way into the lobby.

By this time they were down Sophie. A bullet to her shoulder had made her incapable of firing her weapon.

Just as Clint was starting to believe that the situation was lost, a newcomer joined the fray.

"You're having a party and didn't invite me?" Spiderman swung in through the same entrance as the intruders, "I hope you don't mind if I crash."

"Spiderman?" Joseph called out in surprise, "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighbourhood."

One fighter should not have made so much of a difference. But with Spiderman on their side the defenders were slowly turning the tide.

The fact that Spiderman's webs meant that the invaders could be taken out of the battle with chest shots was a distinct advantage over bullets.

It took nearly a quarter of an hour to take down the invaders. But victory came at a cost. Along with Rebecca's arm; Joseph had taken a bullet crease to the head and was unconscious; Sophie had a gash across her face running dangerously close to her right eye; somehow Gerald had gotten shot in the leg (seriously, Clint was wondering how the *blazes* the man had managed it); Laura was mainly unharmed, just the usual nicks and scratches that occurred in a prolonged gun fight from shrapnel; and Billy… Well, Clint was *certain* that Billy was hurt worse than he was letting on, but the janitor was staying stoically silent on his own injuries, while he tended to the others with Laura's help.

Even Spiderman was looking slightly dishevelled. His suit would need washing at the very least, probably repair or replacement if Clint was right. However he was still moving freely so Clint was under the impression that it was nothing too serious.

Clint, himself, was probably going to be dragged to a medic by Phil at some point in his near future due to this battle. However he didn't see any need to go of his own accord. He wasn't hurt beyond what he could tolerate. It certainly wouldn't interfere with his ability to fight.

While Laura and Billy tended to the others, Clint and Spiderman approached one of the invaders, bound up in Spiderman's webs. Clint was fairly certain that he was the leader of the small force, and therefore might have some of the answers to the questions that were buzzing around in Clint's head.

"AIM?" Spiderman suggested sotto voce to Clint.

"Most likely," Clint agreed, "You deal with them before?"

"Not really." Spiderman shook his head, "I'm more muggers and small scale crimes. Murders and bombs are usually as high as I go on my own. Oh, and organised crime."

"What's your name?" Clint demanded of the bound invader.

As expected the man remained silent.

"You might as well talk," Spiderman put in, "I can think of some really interesting places to string you up. And the thing about my webbing? It degrades over time. Not quick enough for you to escape here and now. But you'd be *amazed* how short a time it feels when your life is hanging by a thread. I could hang you off Lady Liberty."

"Kill me and two more will replace me."

"Maybe," Clint shrugged, "But the thing is… *You'll* be dead. Who do you work for? What were you trying to do?"

"I am but one part of a greater whole. One cog in the great machine. You should learn not to deny us. You have won this battle. But we will win the war."

The man shifted in his bonds slightly, but nowhere near enough to break free.

"Everybody down!" Spiderman yelled suddenly, even as he hauled Clint back into the relative safety of the receptionists' desk.

For a moment Clint glowered at Spiderman.

Then an explosion rocked the room.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year Everyone!

Chapter 33: Chapter 32

Several smaller explosions came in the aftermath.

Clint fought down his instincts, which yelled at him to reverse his current position; Spiderman crouching protectively over him. Clint was the protector. Particularly when it came to untrained children.

Which Spiderman technically classified as, in Clint's mind.

After the explosions, Clint quickly evacuated everyone in the lobby. There was nobody left of the invaders. Almost nothing left *of* them either, apart from blood and chunks of flesh. The scent of burning flesh was heavy in the air.

Making sure that the security guards and receptionists were staying close together and that the sirens he could hear would bring the police and paramedics quickly, Clint moved off after Spiderman.

The younger hero had moved down the side of the building. Clint followed after grabbing part of a plant from one of the planters in front of the structure.

Clint wasn't all that surprised at what he found. Spiderman was almost bent in half, leaning on the wall as he proceeded to throw up the entire contents of his stomach.

"I've got you." Clint gently started to rub the back of the costume.

Idly he noticed that with the bottom half of Spiderman's mask pulled up, so that he could vomit, that Spiderman was Caucasian.

“Here,” Clint crushed the plant in his hand and placed it roughly under Spiderman’s nose, “Breathe deep. This’ll help.”

“Mint?” Spiderman asked after a long pause.

“It helps.” Clint shrugged, “Come on. Let’s move over here.”

Now that the younger man had stopped heaving it would be better to get away from the detritus.

“How’d you know?” Clint queried lightly.

“Know what?” Spiderman’s voice sounded confused, and what little Clint could now see of his face, it showed a frown.

“That they were going to blow up.” Clint pressed.

“I didn’t.”

“Bullshit.” Clint scoffed, “You knew. You got us away. Before we got blown up as well.”

“I *didn’t* know.” Spiderman sighed, “I just… I…”

Clint merely raised an eyebrow in a silent challenge.

“I call it my Spidey-Sense,” Spiderman surrendered, “It tells me when there is danger. I never know *what* is going to happen, until it happens, only that it *will*. I can figure out how bad. But never what. Sometimes direction… But not always. I just knew that something *very* dangerous was going to happen. And that it was going to come at me from his direction. I grabbed you on the principle that if it was dangerous to me it was dangerous to you.”

“Thanks for that.” Clint nodded, “First time you seen an explosion?”

“Explosion, no.” Spiderman shook his head, “I get enough of those from my villains. The smell? That… It’s not been like that before. There’s never… No-one’s ever died in the explosions I’ve seen before. It…”

“Breathe.” Clint laid a firm hand between the kid’s shoulder blades, “Don’t think about it. Just breathe. You’re doing okay, kid. You’re alright. It’s okay. Breathe.”

For a few moments Clint just stayed there, a hopefully comforting presence for the kid, who was narrowly on the edge of shock.

"I'm okay." Spiderman murmured after a while, "Sorry about that."

"It's okay." Clint shrugged, "Thanks for turning up when you did. We'd have been dead meat if you hadn't come along. Why were you in the area?"

"I know you and the others have a protective streak for Mister Stark," Spiderman replied, "I keep an eye on the building just in case."

"No," Clint shook his head, "Don't lie to me. And yes, I know you're lying. I know far better liars than you. And I can spot them every time. I don't care if you don't want to tell me. Just tell me it's none of my damn business. But don't lie to me."

"Okay," Spiderman sighed, "I keep an eye on the building for my own reasons. I also like knowing that the rest of you lot are alright."

"Truth." Clint conceded, "Look, the police are here and they'll be coming down here any moment. Get yourself gone. Nobody will blink at that. I'll contact you for a full report of what you saw and heard later. Probably after the forensics guys have found out exactly *how* they blew themselves up."

Spiderman shuddered at the reference. But didn't go to throw up again, so Clint took that as an improvement.

"Go home." Clint instructed, "Have a hot shower or bath. Use some scented stuff. Strong scented stuff, if you've got it. Then eat something comforting. And if possible curl up with a friend."

"Why?"

"It'll help." Clint reassured, "This isn't something you've experienced before, by my reckoning. I'll be expected to talk to someone. Preferably a Shrink over this. I don't want you going to a bad place in your head, because you didn't have anyone to turn to. And I don't know if you trust me enough to turn to me right now."

"Alright." Spiderman nodded, "I'll see you later."

Then the young hero was off quickly. Clint emerged from the alley and took in the scene.

The police had secured the scene and were interviewing everyone they could see, who might have been involved. The media were dashing around frantically trying to get the best shots possible of the event.

Clint moved towards one of the many police cars to give his statement. He might as well get it out the way quickly as possible.

Looking around he could see the other defenders giving their statements or being tended to by the paramedics, Gerald managing both at the same time.

Billy was keeping his head down, Clint noticed. A cap pulled low over his face, shielding him from the media. There was a secret there, Clint decided. A secret that he would have to find out, to make sure that it wouldn't come back to bite him later.

"Clint!" Phil suddenly appeared and dashed to Clint's side.

It was clear to see that Phil was playing the doting, caring boyfriend. Not that he *wasn't*, but he wasn't usually all that demonstrative in public. It wasn't something that Clint felt comfortable about giving or receiving.

But it served a purpose in situations such as these. The police were unwilling to separate them, so Phil got brought up to speed very quickly. Add in Phil's ability to read between the lines of Clint's comments and he had virtually the full picture in a very short period of time.

As the police drifted away, happy for now, Phil ran his eyes up and down Clint.

"Do I need to drag you to medical?" He asked in a low tone.

"I'm okay." Clint replied calmly, "What about Tony?"

"He's covered." Phil stated firmly, "Steve's on his way here as well. He had to make a statement at the police station first. Spiderman?"

"Hopefully headed home." Clint reassured, "We'll need to keep an eye on him. I don't know how bad this could affect him."

"It was that bad?" Phil pressed.

"You seen in there?" Clint raised an eyebrow, "There's barely anything left of them… *I'm* going to need someone to talk to."

"I'm always willing." Phil reminded.

"I know." Clint nodded, "And that's all that's really keeping me from going nuts and screaming my head off right now… That wasn't normal. The explosion… There was something *wrong* about it."

"It was a suicide bomber." Phil pointed out.

"That wasn't it." Clint shook his head, "I've seen that a few times before. You *know* I have. This was… This was different."

"How?"

"I don't know." Clint frowned, "I just know it was. Maybe the techs will find the answer."

A movement caught Clint's eye. Not because it was a movement, there was a lot of that going on around them. But the *type* of movement it was.

Billy the Janitor was stealthily making his way to the side of the building, to where the side-entrance was.

"We need to keep an eye on that kid," Clint motioned with his chin, "He's more than his background said."

"In what way?" Phil's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Let me put it this way," Clint murmured, "He knows martial arts to a high level and was in a highly intensive gunfight, yet is one of the few who manage to walk away virtually uninjured."

"Point." Phil conceded.

"Who's covering Tony?" Clint asked.

"Thor." Phil shrugged, "It seemed like the best option."

“Was this team trying to kidnap him?” Clint wondered, “If so, their intelligence sucks.”

“No,” Phil shook his head, “There was a team on the diverted route. It is likely that they caused the car crash to divert the traffic more advantageously for their grab. However Mister Hogan didn’t like the route and so chose a different one.”

“I think I owe that guy a bottle of something.” Clint muttered.

“Irish Whiskey,” Phil supplied, “Single Malt.”

“Sometimes,” Clint snorted, “That is just freaky. I’ll bear that in mind though. So what was the whole point of this? Distraction? Have us all running around in circles trying to deal with this, while they run away with Tony and Steve?”

“My God, Clint.” Steve came out of the crowd, “What happened?”

“Funny story,” Clint grinned, half-hysterically, “Three dozen gunmen decided they didn’t like the lobby, then they blew themselves up. Oh, and the janitor is a ninja.”

“Which one?” Steve replied automatically.

“Billy.”

“The kid?” Steve blinked, “I like him. So does Tony. Where is Tony?”

“Japanese Embassy,” Clint stated, “Don’t ask. I’m still clueless. You okay?”

“Fine,” Steve waved the question away, “They didn’t have a clue what they were dealing with. Tony is not going to be happy about this.”

“Tony?” Clint gapped, “I’m more worried about *Pepper*! She *is* the one who usually has to sort out these messes… Though I don’t think this is as bad as some of the parties she’s had to deal with in the past.”

“You might be correct.” Pepper joined the conversation, “Gentlemen, I don’t think I even *want* to know. I’ll get the report from the police later. Are you three all in one piece?”

“Yes.” They chorused.

“Good.” Pepper nodded, “I’ll call the contractors to organise the clean-up from this. And *this* time the Board won’t stop Tony’s recommended security systems. Too paranoid my…”

And Pepper wandered off, her last comment not finished. The three men watched as she deftly approached and started negotiating with the police, even as she fished through her handbag for her phone.

“Sometimes that woman scares me.” Steve murmured.

“Aye.” Clint agreed, “She doesn’t get phased by anything.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen the mess that used to get left behind after his parties before.” Phil pointed out calmly, “This is positively sane.”

“At least Tony’s not to blame.” Clint snorted.

“Not to blame for… Whoa!” Tony appeared and reared back when he saw the state of the lobby, “What happened?”

“Some people don’t like you, it seems.” Clint shrugged.

“So they would dishonourably attack Anthony of Stark’s vassals in his stead?” Thor thundered, “That is not how a warrior fights.”

“This is not the place for this.” Steve’s eyes were flicking around, looking for the danger, “I feel too exposed.”

“Exposed?” Tony frowned, “You weren’t here. I *know* you weren’t here. Clint was here. I can see that. But you weren’t. Why are you feeling exposed? What happened?”

Well, no one ever accused Tony of being dumb… Just usually oblivious to the more subtle nuances of people around him.

“Not out here.” Clint shook his head, “I’d feel better if we got somewhere secure. Your mansion secure?”

“Not better than the Tower.” Tony returned, “And if you’re all going like this on me, I want to be in the Tower.”

“The lobby is cordoned off.” Phil pointed out, “And Clint said the lifts were immobilized. The building is in Lockdown.”

“And if you think that’s the only entrance to the Tower,” Tony countered, “You don’t know me all that well, Coulson. I don’t build places with only one route in and out, even under Lockdown. Nor do I build anything I can’t counter. Not anymore.”

There was an odd turn of tone in Tony’s voice. Something Clint couldn’t quite put his finger on. But it matched the look in Tony’s eyes. Something… Something strange. Something different. Something that Clint hadn’t seen before. Something he hadn’t heard before.

Or perhaps he had. But he didn't know when or where. He couldn't… He couldn't place it. He couldn't name it.

"Follow me." Tony headed off, the rest following close behind him.

He easily led them down the alley Clint had been in earlier.

Going further than Clint had gone, Tony turned to put his building behind him and tapped a few bricks, seemingly no different to the ones around them.

But they were. They sunk into the wall, without Tony putting any sort of force behind his touch.

Then the wall opened.

"So Harry Potter." Clint murmured.

"Puh-lease," Tony grinned, "This is so much better."

A metal spiral staircase was behind the wall and Tony quickly descended down, which was the only direction it went in.

The entrance was quite small though, Tony easily fitted through, as did Phil and Clint, both men being fairly slender in their build. Steve was broader and had to slide through sideways. Thor had to duck and squeeze.

And Clint wasn't a hundred percent certain that the steps were designed for the weight of an Asgardian God. But they made it down them without incident.

Tony then led them along a small passageway, which led to some metal doors. Tony centred himself directly in-front of the doorway.

"Jarvis," He spoke calmly, "Protocol Waylander Returning."

Waylander, it was a strange word. Clint knew he'd seen it before, but he couldn't remember where. It wasn't anything he recalled seeing in official documents, so it was probably just a random word the genius had picked up from one of his TV shows.

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis' voice came, as expected, out of nowhere.

(And what did it say about Clint that he was now totally *used* to English accented male voices speaking from nowhere?)

The doors opened and Tony stepped into the room revealed. Clint blinked upon realizing that it was a lift.

More specifically one of the Stark Tower's lifts.

"I didn't know there was an entrance on this level." Phil remarked.

"No-one does." Tony shrugged, "I used construction-bots for various levels. This was one of them. I claimed it was to speed up construction. The Unions weren't happy, but I made sure they got what they felt was right. Even if I did haggle with them. Have to keep up the image after all."

"Various levels?" Clint frowned.

"I couldn't let Jarvis' memory banks be built by just *anyone*." Tony pointed out, "And the security implications if anyone got knowledge of the Arc Reactor security… Well, I'm sure I don't need to point it out to you."

"Yet, the security for your lobby was breachable." Steve reminded, "Tony, please, I'm worried about your safety."

“The Board didn’t like my design.” Tony sighed, “Said it was “too extreme”. That it “wasn’t suitable”. I’m the CEO, but I can’t go against the Board. Not on things like that. They’re still mad at me for going away from weapons. Despite the fact that I’ve made us *twice* as profitable as was projected when they projected *with* the weapon contracts. *God*! If I could get rid of them…”

“You cannot rule your own people on your own, Tony of Stark?” Thor frowned.

“Your father, Odin has advisors,” Tony returned, “Does he not?”

“Indeed,” Thor nodded, “My father has many he refers to for wisdom. Though he does not need their input to make his decisions. He is wise beyond all.”

“Well, I’m not.” Tony shook his head, “There’s always more to learn. More to discover. I don’t know everything. And no-one can. So to prevent mistakes and stupid things from destroying a company it is not run by one man. The CEO runs most of the company. But they can be stopped by the Board of Directors, if they believe that the CEO is overstepping the bounds, doing something illegal or not acting in the best interests of the company. As they couldn’t stop my decision to turn away from weapons manufacture, not in the political climate of the time, they decided to remind me of their power by interfering with my security protocols for this Tower. In particular the lobby. I got my way with the rest of the building. But I always knew the lobby was the weakest spot of the building. I just couldn’t do anything about it. Now I can… I just wish it hadn’t cost someone their life.”

“You’re a good man, Tones.” Clint squeezed the billionaire’s shoulder, “You did what you could.”

“But it still wasn’t enough.” Tony shrugged the hand off, “Why do people keep dying because I screw up?”

The last line was murmured. It clearly wasn’t meant to be heard. But Clint still heard it. And judging by the looks both Thor and Steve were giving him, they had heard it also. Though if they hadn’t and Clint had, he would be seriously worried.

Yet all three of them chose not to speak.

Or perhaps it was not a choice, given that moments after Tony’s words the lift doors opened once again.

“Welcome home, Sir.” Jarvis greeted calmly, “Welcome home Master Steve, Master Clint, Master Phil and Master Thor. I have taken the liberty of contacting the highest ranking member of security staff on duty that you are present in the Tower as of this moment.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Tony moved quickly out of the lift towards the lounge area.

He flopped down on the sofa. Steve quickly settled next to him, pulling Tony into his lap. Clint could see the tension and worry that Steve was trying to hide. It was there in Steve’s motions as he discretely checked Tony over for any injury.

Thor lounged regally in his usual chair. He was relaxed and calm. But then again he was in the Migardian equivalent of his Halls. It was a safe place in his mind. Somewhere where no one could hurt him. Where they couldn’t even *dream* of hurting him.

Clint wasn’t so confident. Not after the lobby. He couldn’t… *Wouldn’t* feel safe until he knew who and why. But it wasn’t his safety he was really worried about. It was Tony’s.

Tony couldn’t take care of himself. He was a civilian. He was an innocent. And Clint would do whatever it took to stop people from hurting Tony. From hurting his brother.

Clint curled up in his usual spot, with Phil squishing in next to him. Phil, having already reassured himself of Clint’s continued good health, relaxed quickly. At least to all appearances. Clint could feel the tension in Phil’s body. Phil was equally disturbed by what had happened.

“What happened?” Tony asked again, “Why were you feeling exposed Steve?”

“Some men jumped me,” Steve confessed, “While I was out getting pizzas.”

“What?” Tony jolted, trying to stand up.

Steve gently calmed him down, and refused to let him up.

“It’s okay. I’m alright.” Steve reassured, “They didn’t know what they were dealing with. I dealt with them and called the police.”

“What did they want?” Tony was confused.

“To take me with them.” Steve admitted, “They were trying to kidnap me.”

Tony froze.

"That's on me." He declared, "They would only try that because of me."

"It's not your fault." Steve was firm, "That's on them. Not you."

"They would have hurt you." Tony was clearly shaking, "They would have hurt you, because I wouldn't have paid."

"Tony of Stark," Thor's gaze darkened significantly, "It behoves you to pay ransoms for those you have claimed as yours. Especially for those you have declared your love."

"But that's why I can't." Tony countered, "Thor… Years ago, and I am talking years, there was a country, they had a lot of enemies. One of those enemies took a bunch of children hostage. They had demands. Money. Prisoners released. It doesn't really matter what. But the country conceded. They paid what was demanded. The hostages were freed. Unharmed."

"That is good." Thor declared, "It is what you should aim for."

"Not long later," Tony carried on as if Thor hadn't spoken, "Another group of enemies took another group of innocents hostage. They also had demands. They had expectations of their demands being met. After all, the last group had been paid.

"This time the country didn't give in. They didn't pay. They didn't surrender. They sent in soldiers. Killed every single hostage taker and freed the hostages. They haven't paid a ransom since. Every hostage taker has been paid in blood. Their own. Though some hostages have also died."

"Why the change in tactics?" Thor frowned, "Surely the second group was worth just as much as the first?"

"That wasn't the point." Tony sighed, "By paying the first ransom, they painted a target on every single citizen of that nation. Made them all targets for the enemies. Made them all potential leverage points. Put all of them at risk.

"I won't do that. I can't do that. If I give in once… Even for Steve… I put every single Stark Industries' employee and family and loved one at risk. And where do I draw the line? Where do I decide that someone is too low down the totem pole, too unimportant to pay for? I can't do that. I can't tell someone that their pain isn't worth my money. I won't. So Stark Industries doesn't pay ransoms. We don't give into threats or manipulation. We stand firm. No ransom will be paid even for me. It's the best protection I can give my people."

There was a long silence after that. Clint knew that what Tony had said was the truth. He knew that technically it was the truth. That Tony's method was the best way.

The problem was that when it came down to it emotions came into play. And he knew that it would tear Tony apart to not be able to help Steve if such an event ever occurred (as unlikely as that was).

Chapter 34: Chapter 33

Clint was trying to find the right words to say… He *really* didn't want to stick his foot in his mouth at this point.

The screen flickered and the image of one of the higher ranking security guards appeared on it.

"Mister Stark?" The guard inquired, "I apologise for intruding."

"It's okay, Hassan." Tony waved his hand negligently, "What's the problem?"

"Sir," Hassan took a deep breath, "As much as I understand your need to be able to access the penthouse suite easily and discretely, I would appreciate if you could check in with a member of the security team *if* we are in lockdown mode."

"I checked in with Jarvis," Tony shrugged, "That is following protocol."

"I would prefer a human member of the team," Hassan looked to be one comment away from putting his head in his hands and weeping, "Rather than your computer, sir."

"I'll bear that in mind." Tony stated.

Clint knew that that meant Tony would carry on with what he was doing anyway. Besides, it wasn't as if Jarvis was just *any* computer. The AI was almost human.

"Anyway, sir," Hassan continued, "Jarvis stated that Mister Barton was in your company when you returned? If he is willing I would appreciate his help with a small situation on the R&D floors. Section Theta Five. It is nothing big and certainly not a risk to the building or any personnel. However I believe he is best suited to resolving the issue."

"Clint?" Tony looked at the Archer.

"Sure." Clint shrugged.

To be honest his curiosity was piqued. A problem in the R&D labs would normally require Tony or Bruce's presence. Not his own. He wasn't dumb, but he was no genius either.

And it wasn't as if Theta Five was a dangerous section. In fact, if Clint remembered correctly it was a small biochemical lab mainly concentrating on transgenics; in particular focusing on the production of spider silk in large enough quantities to develop into useful items.

Though exactly what they were trying for, Clint wasn't sure, as he'd tuned out the rest of that discussion.

Moving towards the stairs, Clint casually loosed up. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. And despite Hassan's words, he would *always* prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

There was only Hassan and one other security guard (Clint thought she was Frances) waiting for him in section Theta Five.

"What's this about?" Clint asked.

"We've accounted for every person in the building." Hassan declared, "Every heat signature has been identified. Apart from one."

"One?" Clint raised an eyebrow. One was enough to cause serious damage; he should know, he usually *was* the one.

"We think we know who it is." Frances shrugged, "Yours."

"I'm here." Clint looked at her like she had grown a second head.

Or somewhat; when Ward had grown a second head (which had proceeded to spend the entire time arguing with the first) Clint hadn't quite looked at him the same as he was currently looking at Frances, but that might have been due to the third arm Ward had also gained at the same time.

Magic. Can't live with it. Can't have temporary additional body parts without it.

"That's not what…" Frances tailed off.

“What do you know about the Intern program?” Hassan queried.

“Interns are interns?” Clint half-questioned, “It’s the same as pretty much anywhere else. Similar to apprenticeship. In all aspects of the company. No guarantee of employment. General dogsbody.”

“Yes and no.” Hassan sighed, “We’re a bit different. Most Interns are just as you said. General dogsbodies. They belong to a department and have to impress to get offered a job, usually with training or a scholarship to a university studying the subject of our choice. They turn up in all departments. Quality Management; Sales; Human Resources; Marketing; Production; Logistics; Advertising; Accounting; Engineering; R&D. You name it.”

“But there’s a second type of Intern. The Stark Intern.” Frances put in.

“The Stark Intern?” Clint repeated.

“They stand out.” Hassan declared, “They’re always hired by Mister Stark himself. No one knows why he picks them. Or how. He just does. Then he assigns them to a person. Not a department. A *person*.”

“Stark Interns are practically guaranteed a job and a scholarship at a top university.” Frances added, “They’re always different. Work longer. Work harder. They shine. They flourish.”

“There’s certain allowances made for them.” Hassan agreed, “A normal Intern is expected to work a certain number of hours at least, and no more than a certain higher number of hours, depending upon the age of the Intern and the department. It’s also expected to be regular. No skipping days by pulling all-nighters.”

“Stark Interns are immune to that.” Frances continued, “If one of them wants to work twenty hour days for a full week and then barely come in for two weeks? That’s fine. Depending upon the needs of the department of course. They can’t really do that in Accounting say. But R&D? Yeah, sure.”

“What’s this got to do with anything?” Clint interrupted, “Much as I appreciate it.”

“Everyone entering and exiting this building is required to check in or out.” Hassan carried on, “Sometimes people forget to check out. So when we looked at the logs to see who was in there was one person who has been logged in for over a day and a half. We thought he’d just forgotten to log out again. Only…”

“Only there’s an extra heat signature.” Clint shrugged, “What’s this got to do with me?”

“It’s Parker.” Frances blurted out, “And he’s yours.”

“I’m still confused as to how I own an Intern.” Clint declared.

“Parker was recruited.” Hassan started laying everything out, “The e-mail about his placement said that he would be working with the biochemical department and the computer

science department. Not assigned *to*. Working *with*. That said he belonged to someone. That he was a Stark Intern. For a long time we thought he was Mister Stark's Intern. Because he was never stated as belonging to anyone."

"But we asked once," Frances carried on, "And Mister Stark said that Parker was yours."

"So because of Tony I own an Intern?" Clint fired out, "I don't *want* an Intern. I'm not responsible enough for an Intern. Phil won't even let me have a *dog*, because he thinks I won't look after it properly. Feed it pizza and all that. I suggested a cat as an alternative and he shot that down too!"

"Don't worry." Hassan shrugged, "Parker pretty much looks after himself. Anyway, we think it's him in here. But we can't find the footage of him going in. The door is locked. And we can't override it while we're still in lockdown. And we can't override it while there's an unidentified heat signature."

"Nice Catch-22 that." Clint blinked.

"We thought so." Frances nodded, "It's never been a problem before. We've always been able to identify people by iris-scan, fingerprint or voice recognition. Only he's not answering."

"I thought you had to do all three?" Clint queried.

"Officially yes." Hassan agreed, "But we only need one to get a door open. Once all heat signatures in a room have had at least one method used we can open the door to do the rest."

"He's not answering." Frances declared, "We can't even see in. The lights are motion activated, and he's not moved for ages."

"So you want me to do what?" Clint asked, "I'm not that good at voice imitation."

"We think he's scared." Hassan stated, "Which is why he won't talk to us. We think he'll respond to you."

"Better idea," Clint flicked his eyes upwards, "Can I borrow one of those?"

Moments later, Clint was up in the vents, one of the security scanners in his hand. Initially he was surprised by the lack of dust in the vent, but then he remembered that Tony had a couple of low intelligence bots that cleaned the vents somewhat regularly in the lower levels (read: every two months). They must have recently done the section.

Surprisingly the vent grill was slightly loose, Clint made a mental note about it. He might need to be careful going over other such grills in the future. He wouldn't want them giving

way beneath him.

Clint lowered himself down into the storage room and blinked in surprise when the light failed to come on.

However there was enough light peeking through the gap between the door and the doorframe for Clint to see enough.

A figure was curled up in a small corner. Clint had to smoother a snort. The Intern wasn't hiding. He wasn't scared.

He was *asleep*!

"Hey, kid." Clint gently tapped a shoulder, "Wake up."

"Huh?" A sleepy voice groaned, as the Intern slowly moved upwards, "Clint?"

"Peter?" Tired the voice may have been, but Clint knew it, "You're not Parker. Why didn't they just *say* it was you?"

"Yes, I am." Peter blinked blurrily, "Peter Parker."

"You're not Parker to *me*!" Clint fired back, "You're *Peter*. Look, security check. Finger-print, Iris-scan, Voice-print."

Sighing Peter went through the motions of the Iris-scan and Finger-print.

"Peter Parker." He declared for the Voice-print, "Intern. Web-head."

"Web-head?" Clint was confused.

"Don't ask." Peter sighed, "Just, please don't. It's *embarrassing*!"

Clint made a note to grill Tony later. No doubt the genius would know.

“Why are you in here?” Clint asked.

“Sleeping.” Peter shrugged.

“Why *here*?” Clint tried again.

“I… Aunt May’s on holiday.” Peter confessed, “I managed to save up enough to send her to Florida. She could do with the nice weather. She’s not been well recently. The… The house is too empty. And I was running a few synthesis and analysis programs, which I wanted to check on as soon as they were done. It seemed like a waste of time to go home and then come back, so I just… Crashed here.”

“The Tower went into Lockdown.” Clint sighed, “And you’ve been curled up asleep. Didn’t you notice the siren?”

“Doesn’t sound on the R&D floors,” Peter replied, “Just in case it makes someone jump at the wrong moment. Could make the situation worse. We get a flashing light. In the corridors and the labs. Not in here.”

“Let’s get you out and get you fed.” Clint declared, “God only knows when you last ate. You’re as bad as Tony sometimes, you know that kid?”

“Considering what he creates,” Peter grinned in return, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Tony,” Clint pushed the door open, “Has the common sense and self-preservation instincts of a concussed duckling!”

“You would know.” Hassan snorted, “You live with the man.”

“And the number of times I’ve seen Steve carry him out of his workshop so that he will go to sleep is getting freaking ridiculous!” Clint retorted.

“Is it that bad?” Frances frowned, “I’ve heard stories but… He’s Tony Stark.”

“He’s a freaking idiot.” Clint declared, “Works *far* longer than is healthy. Holes up in his workshop for days on end, if Steve isn’t around. Has somehow taught his body that Chinese takeaway, pizza and pastries are all that is needed for a healthy diet. And not a regular intake of *that* either. He rarely remembers to sleep. Oh, he’s a Genius. I’d never deny that. But he’s a freaking idiot.”

And that was all there really was to say. Clint directed Peter to the nearest food station, and got Frances to make sure that the young scientist actually *went* there and ate.

Meanwhile Clint returned back to the Penthouse floors.

"I got it Pepper," Tony sounded like he was crowing, "I managed it. Niihamanishi Power Station is ours from the next Quarter Day. We whip out the coal fired system and set up an Arc Reactor. The Japanese want Niihama City in the Ehime Prefecture receiving power from us by the Quarter Day after that. Or there's a whole lot of fines involved. But with construction bots and some forward thinking that won't be a problem. If we can prove it works, we should be in a position to take over a few of the other Nuclear Reactors sometime next year. Particularly given the current political climate and popular opinion over there. Possibly all of them, eventually."

"Then we expand into the Japanese Market." Pepper sounded equally pleased, though her voice was slightly tinny (a video-conference, Clint deduced), "We've been trying to get a breakthrough there since before…"

"Before Howard died." Tony agreed, "Though part of that was their unwillingness to work with a man who developed the bombs that we dropped on them. And part of that was Howard's insistence not to sell them weapons and he had severely neglected all other revenue sources. Anyway… How goes Hawaii?"

"Our partnership with Hamakua Energy Partners," Pepper declared, "Is progressing satisfactorily. Though I wish we had been in a position to simply build one ourselves."

"Would take too long." Tony shook his head, "This was quicker and easier. Plus, Hamakua Energy Partners is owned by ArcLight Capital Partners and we're working on buying it off them."

"I did wonder what was going on there," Pepper noted, "But I was far too occupied with Japan."

"I was trying to surprise you." Tony shrugged, "Can you sort out what we need to do for an opening ceremony in Japan? Get the right person to cut the ribbon and all that jazz?"

"Can't you do it?" Steve asked, "I mean it's your plant."

"Wouldn't go down too well," Tony replied calmly, "A Gaijin? It was hard enough getting them to let us have the plant. Try for a Minister. Environment, METI or MEXT. Those would probably be the best."

"I know the drill." Pepper reminded, "Tea Ceremony?"

"If you can avoid it, please do." Tony remarked, "I always end up looking like a twit in those. I swear *Briar* can do those better than me. We're only lucky I didn't completely fluff the one at the Embassy up."

"I'll sort it." Pepper stated, "Speaking of Openings, the Hawaii plant is being reopened in one month. You need to be there for the Opening Ceremony."

“I need to get there a fortnight in advance.” Tony reminded, “Just for a few days. To finish the hook up and check everything is going to work.”

“Already booked into your schedule.” Pepper smirked, “I’m not your PA anymore Tony. I’ve got the Governor of Hawaii booked to cut the ribbon.”

“Be nice to see Pat.” Tony remarked

“Not Jameson,” Pepper shook her head, “Governor Denning. It has been for a few years now.”

“Oh yeah,” Tony blinked, “Pat had that murder thing.”

“Yes,” Pepper sighed, “That murder thing, Tony. So in recap: Japan’s on board, I’ll roll the logistics now I know the timetable; Hawaii is all set; the workers to fix the lobby will be arriving tomorrow and we’re working off your original plans. Will that be all Mister Stark?”

“Yes,” Tony smiled, “That will be all, Miss Potts.”

Pepper cut the connection.

“Murder thing?” Steve looked at Tony, “A Governor got arrested for murder?”

“No, Pat got murdered.” Tony shrugged, “Then it turned out she’d been friends with a known crime boss for quite a while. It’s complicated.”

“Why Japan?” Phil spoke up.

“What?” Tony looked confused.

“Why are you so determined to put an Arc Reactor in Japan?” Phil explained.

Clint had to confess that was puzzling him too.

“There’s problems with Congress.” Tony sighed, “There’s talk of forcing me to hand over the designs of the Arc Reactor for military purposes. Of claiming it from me under the pretence of National Security. I’m fighting it. But I can’t guarantee that I will win. By getting it installed outside the country, for a purely peaceful purpose, I stop them. They can’t recall what has already happened. Fortunately the wheels of government move slowly in most matters. I have time.”

"They would *dare*?!" Thor thundered.

"They're under pressure, Sparky," Tony flopped backwards into Steve's arms, "A lot of Senators and Congressmen… Their main supporters… Main backers… Main donators… They're in the Oil business. And my Arc Reactor? It'll cut the need for oil. Dramatically. They're scared of losing income. They're scared of losing revenue. So they're putting all the force and pressure they can to get me to sit down and shut up. To lose the Arc Reactor in the depths of my archives. Only I won't. I'm even working on a Green Car. To completely cut this Nation's dependency on oil and gas. This… This is my legacy. A future. A *clean* future. And they want me to ignore it. I won't do that. I chose Japan, because they have to import all of their oil and gas. They *need* green energy. So does Hawaii. Same problem. Next I'll start spreading into other States. Other Countries. Because once I've proven beyond a doubt that it *works* then people won't turn it down."

"Surely Greenpeace love the idea." Steve frowned.

"I doubt they know." Tony snorted, "The Oil and Gas Companies have a lot invested in keeping me quiet. I'm going along with it at the moment, so that they don't realize that Hawaii goes live in two months. That Japan won't be long after that. By then, it'll be too late."

Clint hastily smothered a snort. Tony was acting as if it were a military operation. Or a Black Ops mission. It was simple and fairly amateurish. But it was amusing. And would probably work.

"Well," Steve buried his nose in Tony's hair for a moment, "I think you need something to eat. Give me a moment. Anyone else want anything?"

Phil shook his head. Thor loudly proclaimed his desire for pop-tarts. Clint called out his request for a pastry of some kind. He knew that Steve would interpret it correctly, steering clear of the heavy stuff. Clint never liked heavy stuff after combat. Though he did like sweet stuff.

123456789

"Tony," Clint lent forward in his seat slightly, "Tell me about Billy."

"Billy?" Tony was clearly confused.

"The Janitor." Clint elaborated.

However Tony still remained clearly baffled.

"The ninja?"

"Oh, Arashi!" Tony replied quickly, "He's a good kid."

"Arashi?" Phil frowned.

"That's just what I call him." Tony shrugged, "Look, leave him alone. He doesn't… He doesn't need people poking into his life."

"Tony?" Clint pressed gently, "He's a good fighter. A *very* good fighter. Too good. I'm worried about your safety. Especially with everything that has just happened. I want to do a deep background check."

"You won't find anything." Tony stated.

"You can't be certain." Clint argued, "I could have missed something the first time."

"You won't find anything," Tony repeated, "Because there's nothing to be found. Everything you found the first time around… I created."

"Why?" Phil breathed.

"A friend came to me," Tony waved his hands vaguely as he explained, "Billy was in the Witness Protection Program. He was found. Multiple times. They lost Agents protecting him. My friend was aware of his case. Not involved in the Program. Not involved in any kind of Law Enforcement. He knew about Billy from a friend. Billy was nearly killed a few times. Nearly kidnapped a few others. So my friend came to me. Asked me to hide Billy. Make him disappear. For as long as Billy needed.

"I agreed. I gave him a home here. He has one of the flats on the lower floors. Along with several other employees. I created all his files. All his background. Organised his bank accounts and his emancipation. I enlisted him in an online school so that he can get his GED. I organised his employment."

"As a Janitor?" Clint raised an eyebrow.

"I offered him any job he was qualified for," Tony shrugged, "He said Janitor. I offered Secretary. He said Janitor. I offered Security Guard. He said Janitor. I offered PA. He said Janitor. Every time my PA quits I send him an application form. All filled in. Just needs his signature. He always returns it. Folded into an origami shape. Coloured to match the image."

“So that’s where they come from.” Clint had noticed Tony’s small collection of Origami, in his office, but had never remarked on it.

“I can never catch him returning them either.” Tony declared, “They just appear in the centre of my desk. He’s the only person allowed to clean my office. Janitor may be beneath him, because he is *very* smart. But he’s good at what he does. And by smart, I don’t mean me-smart or Bruce-smart or even Peter-smart. But he is significantly above the average in intelligence.”

“This is a foolish act,” Thor decided, “Warriors should face their enemies bravely. You do him a disservice by allowing him to hide in your shadows. He should face them and either destroy them or meet his end honourably.”

“He is a *child*!” Tony roared, rising to his feet, “He was only ten when they started hunting him. Only *ten*! And they don’t want him dead. They want to make an example out of him. They want him to *suffer*! I don’t know who they are. I don’t know where they are. I don’t know *what* they are. But I will protect him with everything I have. Both for the sake of my friend and for his. I don’t know what happens on Asgard. But here, on *Earth*, we believe in protecting our children. And by fair means or foul, Billy is now one of mine. Not my son. Not my child. But he is one of *mine*! He is my Arashi. And you will *not* put him into danger. You will *not* poke around in his past. Even *I* don’t know about it. I did not ask. And my friend asked me not to look.”

“And you respected his request?” Phil raised an eyebrow in surprise and questioning.

“He…” Tony faltered for a moment, “After Stane… After the Iron Man revelation… After I stopped all weapon production… I got a lot of phone calls. A lot. Jarvis filtered most of them out. They were all the same really. Insulting me. Calling me a coward. Trying to attack my pride. Trying to get me to change my mind.

“He called. My friend. He’s in the Army. Runs a unit. I can never remember the Unit’s name. But I’d worked with them a few times. Speciality stuff. They don’t take off the rack. They tinker. You give them a standard tank, and they’ll change it. Adjust it, so that it fits their needs better. I like them. He called. He wanted to know what I could do to help him. If I built a jeep, would I object to them sticking weapons on to it? If I built a plane, would I let them drop bombs from it? How could I improve their communications? Could I provide better shielding for their base? Could I make their base disappear? What could I do on the medical front?

“He didn’t care that I wouldn’t make weapons anymore. He accepted it. And he moved on. He was… He was the first person who really *accepted* what I was doing. I like him for that. He gets a lot of my best stuff. My newest stuff. My prototype-needs-testing-in-the-field stuff. He’s only ever asked me that one favour. It was so little to me… Why shouldn’t I?”

The question was rhetorical, Clint knew that.

"No reason at all." Yet, he still answered the question for the genius.

"Just…" Tony's voice broke slightly, "Just leave Arashi alone. He won't hurt me. And I don't want him hurt. Not for my sake. Not in my name."

"Why do you call him Arashi?" Clint asked quickly.

There were far too many other questions that Tony's little speech had brought up. It would be easier to ignore them temporarily if he discussed the small, little, harmless things.

"There's a Manga," Tony snorted in mild amusement, "About Ninjas. One of the characters… Well, he's not really a main character, but he is important. Because he died. But he was known as the greatest ninja. Had a Flee-on-Sight order. And for a long, long time, his name was never given. Only his title. A lot of fans made guesses about his name. One of them was Arashi. I started using it for Billy and… He liked it. I tried Storm, which is the translation, but he didn't like that. Said it wasn't his name. So he's Arashi."

It made sense. Or at least as much sense as Tony ever made when it came to personal things anyway.

"Why give him a nickname at all?" Phil frowned, "Billy is no longer than Arashi."

"That… That's…" Tony stumbled, "It's… It's complicated."

"Now, *I'm* curious." Clint spoke softly, "Tones?"

"It's… Embarrassing." Tony confessed.

"Please?" Steve asked as he passed around plates of food, "I think its sweet. But I am curious."

"When I was little," Tony closed his eyes, "I mean, *really* little, like six or so, Howard always introduced me as Anthony. But I preferred Tony. And I told him that. Several times. But he always called me Anthony. Everyone did. Apart from Aunt Peggy and my Uncles and… And Ja… Jarvis. And Howard would tell them off for not calling me Anthony. One day I asked why. He told me that I was his. He made me. I was his creation. He named me.

He named me Anthony. It was my name, because he called me that. He might have been slightly drunk at the time. But I learned from him that anything that was mine was mine to name. And anything that I named was mine. It's really circular logic, I know. But it made sense to me at the time.

"I took my name back. Started insisting on Tony. And most people were willing to indulge me. When I was little they thought it was cute. A tiny child declaring 'I prefer Tony'. As I got older, more people were used to it. By the time I got to MIT everyone knew I was Tony Stark. Not Anthony. Howard hated it. But there wasn't anything he could do about it. I was my own person. Not just his son.

"I didn't really start naming stuff until MIT. Up until then I had names for other people. But they were names they gave me to call them. Even if I was the only person who used them. I quickly figured out that naming stuff doesn't work. It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make it *yours*. But if you name stuff with a mind of its own. Like Dummy and Jarvis… Then it's yours. I mean I make loads of phones, but they're not *mine*. But the stuff with a mind and a heart and a soul, for lack of a better word? Those I name. Those are mine.

"First person I named was Rhodey. Though I called him Honey-bear at first. Trying to annoy him really. Trying to get him to prove that he didn't care. That he was just putting up with me. That he was just pretending. He didn't mind the nickname. Responded to it very quickly. So after a month I realized he was in it for the long haul. That's when he became Rhodey. I still use Honey-bear from time to time, and occasionally Platypus. Some people need more than one name. Some people can't be defined by just one name.

"Pepper was named for the wash of freckles across her nose and the pepper-spray she used to get to me. Happy for the way he made me feel, and still makes me feel. Dummy because I was such a dummy programing half-drunk if not completely. Jarvis is Just A Rather Very Intelligent System. Things are easier than people to name. They won't mind if it's a stupid or insulting name.

"I name people and things that are mine. And in naming them I make them mine. It's stupid and silly and… And *ridiculous*. But I can't help it. Not anymore. I've been doing it too long."

"You haven't nicknamed me." Clint frowned.

"I haven't found the right name." Tony shrugged, "Thor is very easy… Point Break, Big Guy… I just haven't found the right name or names for the rest of you. I'll know them

when I find them. I know that."

In a way it was comforting. Particularly given the anguish that flashed through Tony's eyes. He was upset about not being able to name them correctly.

Some part of Clint wondered if the reason that Tony couldn't name them properly was that he didn't know about them being part of the Avengers. But if that was why, then he would never be able to, because they could never tell him. It would be too risky.

Clint didn't fail to spot that the small, bite-sized food on the plate was rapidly disappearing into Tony, almost without him noticing that he was eating. Clint kept quiet; he was firmly of the belief that Tony needed to eat more.

"When you find it," Steve smiled, "I know it'll be the right one."

And if that wasn't a cue to leave, Clint didn't know what was. Tony was on the verge of climbing into Steve's lap once again. Clint could see that Tony was starting to shake.

"I could have lost you." Tony whispered; Clint read Tony's lips more than he heard the words.

"I would have been okay." Steve replied, "I would have been fine."

"No," Tony shook his head, "You wouldn't… They would have… They could have… It would have been Afghanistan all over again."

Clint repressed a shudder as he left the room, Phil and Thor following behind him. It seemed even Thor could pick up a hint.

"Friend Clint," Thor frowned, once they were far enough away from Steve and Tony not to be heard, "What was Tony of Stark referring to when he mentioned Afghanistan?"

"Afghanistan," Clint didn't fail to notice that Thor was now using Tony, rather than Anthony, "Was where Tony was held prisoner and tortured."

“Such a deed shall not be allowed to happen again.” Thor declared fiercely, “Tony of Stark is not to have such violence touch him.”

“That sounds more like a vow than a statement,” Phil spoke slowly, “What do we not know, Thor?”

“My brother.”

And didn’t *that* just make all the muscles in Clint’s shoulders tense? As if trying to fend off an invisible blade. A hand rose to cover his heart, trying to protect against loosing himself once again.

“He has charged me with the protection of Tony of Stark.” Thor continued gently, “It was a boon he requested of me. I saw no harm in acquiescent. I am also of the belief that it may achieve a great deal of good.”

“Hold on,” Clint frowned, “Loki wants Tony kept safe?”

“Verily,” Thor nodded, “He wouldst not state why in precise detail. However he didst declare that should Tony of Stark not be kept safe Migard itself would not be safe.”

“He would threaten us over Tony?” Clint was confused, “He’s never met him. All he knows about Tony is what I told him.”

“That is not true, my friend,” Thor shook his head, “I too have spoken with my brother about Tony of Stark. At great length. He is constantly interested in our activities. Though I have not betrayed any personal confidences. Also, it is not a threat from my brother. He stated it as a fact. He implied that Tony of Stark is inextricably linked to the security of Migard. My brother has many secrets. This is one he is enjoying holding close to himself. I believe it amuses him.”

“Do you believe he intends any harm to Tony?” Phil asked.

“No, Son of Coul.” Thor stated, “My mother has suggested that Loki empathises with Tony of Stark. I believe that my brother has decided to judge how I have changed by how I view Tony of Stark. It was, after all, Tony of Stark who first gave me a true insight into my brother’s point of view.”

Clint had to concede that. And it wasn’t as if Loki could cause any harm to Tony from Asgard.

But still Clint felt uncomfortable. Like there was something he was missing. It wasn't as if Tony really kept any secrets from them. Not *big* secrets at least. Business secrets, yes. But not personal big secrets.

Yes, he kept secrets about Afghanistan. But that was more not wanting to relieve the nightmares than anything else.

Chapter 35: Chatper 34

"Stark," Phil's voice was calm and soft, "We need to talk about your security for Hawaii."

"You can put however many agents you want on me," Tony returned quickly, "But in return, you keep Steve, Pepper, Clint, Bruce, Sam, Jane… Darcy, Natasha and Thor safe."

"Not Billy?" Phil blinked in surprise.

"Billy's kept safe by the fact that no-one knows I'm protecting him." Tony shrugged, "That no-one knows I care for him. Plus he rarely ever leaves here. And the security team see him as a kid brother, so he's not on anyone's radar. You watch me with however many people you deem necessary, but the *moment* one of those I deem precious is put in danger I'll do whatever it takes to make sure they aren't hurt."

"You said there was a no-ransom policy." Phil pointed out.

"I didn't say I would be paying a ransom." Tony returned.

There was a layer of ice in Tony's voice. It made Clint shiver from his position in the vents.

"You are a businessman, Mister Stark." Phil reminded.

"I am a former *weapons* manufacturer, Agent Coulson." Tony stated, "Do you really think that there is much that I wouldn't do to protect those I care for? And do you really think I don't have contacts that aren't exactly kosher? Not exactly people that you and yours would approve of? And I have a lot of money. There isn't a policy against hiring a rescue team."

Tony turned and walked away. He was not walking like Tony though. He was walking like Stark. And it was wrong in Clint's mind that a civilian had to have a mask so complete that it even had a different walk.

Clint slipped out of the vents to land next to Phil.

"I believe him." Clint shrugged.

"So do I." Phil replied, "That's the problem."

“Not like he’s asking much.” Clint pointed out, “No one we wouldn’t be keeping safe anyway. And if it means he doesn’t fight the protection detail…”

“It is a very good deal.” Phil agreed, “Almost too good to be true. I’m going with him. I might be able to stop him going off the reservation.”

“I don’t think he will.” Clint frowned slightly, “Not after Afghanistan.”

“No,” Phil nodded, “You would be right. If I hadn’t seen what he hides so well, I’d say that Afghanistan broke him. Sometimes I’m not sure it didn’t.”

“What do you mean what he hides?” Clint blinked, “He hides the broken parts of himself.”

“And underneath that,” Phil sighed, “He hides the core of iron that he got from his father.”

“No,” Clint shook his head, “He learned it. But he didn’t get it from Howard… Look, I’m not certain… And I know Howard was a good man… But I don’t think he was a good father.”

“You cannot judge…”

“Yes, I *can*.” Clint stressed, “My father was… Well, you know my story. But even *I* have a verbal trip up if I try to call him by name. He’s either my father or my old man. But Tony doesn’t even blink about it. I don’t deny that Howard Stark did a lot of good for the world. That he was a good man. A great man. A patriot, even when people thought he wasn’t… But I don’t believe he was a good father. And there is a difference.”

“I know.” Phil whispered, “But it’s hard to accept that the Howard Stark I saw and still see in the files…”

“Different people.” Clint shrugged, “Besides, I’m virtually convinced that Howard knew that Tony was smarter than him… And he couldn’t deal with it. Man had an ego from what I heard.”

“You heard right.” Phil agreed, “I never interacted with him much. But I saw some of what he was like… Big thing I remember of him… About few months before he died. He was arguing with Fury. Something about missing funds. Fury said that the books added up. So nothing was missing. Howard wouldn’t listen. Not for one moment. Kept saying that the books had been cooked. I checked. There was nothing wrong. Everything was above board. But Howard… He was insistent. Even with all the evidence… He refused to admit he was wrong.”

Clint could hear the touch of amusement and exasperation in Phil’s voice. He could tell that Phil had clearly respected the man. Even if he had been driven close to insanity by the last obsession of a man refusing to admit a mistake.

"What?" Agent Barton jerked his body upright, the feet of the chair he was in hitting the floor, "Come again?"

"There was no accelerant or explosive residue at the scene." The scientist repeated, "We believe it was a spontaneous explosion of the AIM operatives involved."

"Look," Spiderman was obviously rolling his eyes behind his mask, "I've heard of spontaneous human combustion. I don't *believe* in it, but I've heard of it. But I've *never* heard of spontaneous human *explosions* before. And I would have heard of it."

"You are sure about that?" Agent Romanov blinked in surprise, "How can you be certain?"

"Trashy, trashy tabloids." Spiderman returned, "They've never mentioned it. And they would have if there was even the barest *hint* that it had happened before… Though I do know of several *animals* that explode."

"Is it even possible?" Rogers (and yes, despite his marriage he was *still* Rogers) asked, "I know spontaneous human combustion usually involves some sort of alcohol."

Agent Coulson raised an eyebrow in surprise at the knowledge.

"Tony." Rogers explained.

"It's not technically possible." Banner frowned, "There is no explosive compound present in the human body."

"Though," Spiderman had his head cocked to one side, "Theoretically you could *manufacture* explosives from the compounds and elements present in the human body. There's glycerine and nitrogen for Nitroglycerin. Urea and Nitrogen for Urea Nitrate. Sulpher, Saltpetre and Carbon for Gunpowder. I suppose you could even create HBT, HMX and HHTDD if you really wanted."

"That would require being able to manipulate the compounds on a molecular level." Banner countered, "Unless you had access to a lab, which we know they didn't."

"But it's AIM." Spiderman pointed out, "I'm willing to bet that if anyone can, they can. Although… Normal cellular respiration produces energy… If you sped that up…"

"Wouldn't work without a fuel source." Banner argued.

“But if you were going fast enough,” Spiderman was rolling his index fingers in a circle, “It’d go for the nearest fuel source. That being the rest of the body.”

“But that’d be more combustion than explosion.” Banner pointed out.

“If it’s going fast enough,” Spiderman’s fingers sped up, “You would get an explosion. Plus, enough heat would cause the gunpowder in the bullets to explode, along with the grenades. It’d be eliminated from a forensic analysis as simply something that happens in an explosion. Also fats can be explosive, due to their highly flammable nature. Pretty much anything can explode if it’s oxidising quickly enough.”

“I am more than slightly worried that you know that,” Barton spoke up, “But I can’t see any flaws in your logic. Then again I’m no genius.”

“He’s right.” Rhodes sighed, “I’m no biologist or specialist in this area. But the information is theoretically correct. Doctor?”

“Agreed.” Banner nodded, “Theoretically he is correct. Though how you would induce such an action is beyond me.”

“I have a theory,” Spiderman put in, “But I’m no expert in this field. Doctor Banner, you would know better whether this could be a viable hypothesis. I defer to you in this instance.”

“Ask away.” Banner leaned forward, clearly curious.

“The Captain,” Spiderman pointed at Rogers, “Has an increased calorific intake. If I am correct in my research, it has long been deemed a side-effect of the Serum.”

“Correct.” Banner nodded.

“I have an alternative theory,” Spiderman carried on, “It’s not a side-effect. It’s a necessary component. Athletes eat more. They require more energy to do the things they do. What if the Serum’s the same? I suspect that it is. But only more so, because the cells are metabolising quicker than a normal person’s cells, even at rest. What if it was a failed version of the Serum? Without a limiting factor to stop the cells’ metabolism from going faster and faster and faster?”

“Why would someone use a thing like that?” Rogers asked, “It’d be certain death.”

“You did.” Spiderman pointed out, “You were willing to risk everything for a chance. You had no way of knowing that it would work. I did my research; AIM are known for being willing to die rather than be captured. Why not try something that has only a small chance of working? If there was a chance that they could become strong enough to complete their mission?”

“That’d be crazy.” Banner declared, “They couldn’t break your webbing.”

“Actually, there’s a chance,” Spiderman shrugged, “My webbing degrades a lot faster than normal spider webs. *Much* faster. It’s gone in two hours. Most people could probably

break it after an hour and a half. Super Soldier strong? Less than an hour. I wouldn't know exactly."

"So, worth the risk," Coulson agreed, "Either way they stood to mostly likely take both yourself and Barton out of the picture, possibly permanently."

"They are *desperate* to capture Stark." Romanov decided, "Weakening or removing his defenders would be a good tactical move. Barton has already identified himself as one of Starks' defenders. You should not have shown your hand so openly at Pym's Celebration Party."

"I reacted." Barton shrugged, "Perhaps inappropriately looking back. But hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Besides, anyone doing any research on me will learn that I am effectively a soldier-for-hire. You may pretty it up as 'Security Consultant', but everyone knows what it means."

"Actually they think you're a thief." Coulson countered, "You're down as being involved with location security. Primarily buildings. Rogers is down as a 'Personal Security Consultant', as is Romanov, though most people assume she's a secretary."

"One that can kill you five different ways with only a paperclip." Wilson muttered, "Some secretary."

"Eight." Romanov put in, the tiniest traces of a smirk on her lips.

"Black Widow is a good name for her." Spiderman shuddered, "What are we doing about Stark's security? If they're willing to go this far… They're not going to stop now."

"As long as he's in the private sections of the Tower he's secure." Coulson stated, "If he leaves the Tower, SHEILD will be running security for him. The problem is if he goes down to the Company floors or worse the Public floors."

"He should be safe on the R&D floors," Rogers countered, "And he doesn't really venture beyond those for the other Company floors. Miss Potts is now generally deemed as the day-to-day face of the Company. Besides, we screen everyone who has access to those floors."

"We screen everyone who has access to SHIELD, Captain." Coulson closed his eyes, "That still did not stop our New York Base from exploding, back when we were still the SSR. Anyone can be compromised. At any time. It is a fact of life. We train our operatives to be resistant to most known forms of mental manipulation. Or at the very least to identify them. But civilians do not have such defences. And there are simple methods to control a person. We cannot protect everyone from these methods. We *must* prevent Stark from being taken. We need protection on the R&D floors."

"We can't follow him all the time." Barton reminded, "We left him with Thor for this meeting. But we can't isolate him. And we can't follow him all the time on the R&D floors."

"Can you keep him off those floors?" Romanov pressed, "Cut him down to his lab…"

“Workshop.” Rogers interrupted, “And no. One he would notice. And two it’s not feasible. He *needs* to be able to communicate with the R&D labs and to show them things. And he won’t let them in his workshop. That’s his safe place.”

“You can’t just confine him.” Wilson put in, “It’s not good for his mental health. It’s taken a lot of work to get him comfortable enough to venture out of his workshop into the general labs to do even *some* of his work. Never mind what it took to get him to go to the Japanese Embassy. And Hawaii is the next step. Going somewhere *outside* of New York? I’m foreseeing at least three hours of therapy before *that* plane trip.”

“Do you object to that?” Spiderman sounded curious.

“Never.” Wilson replied immediately, “I just hate that he feels so scared that he needs therapy. He was getting better. Before he got snatched by AIM he was able to go out without being scared. He was walking in Central Park on a regular basis and going to the cinema… Albeit a very small one. His ability to walk freely was reduced when he moved back into the Public Eye. But he retreated further after his abduction. I’m making progress. But…”

“But the world is beating him back.” Rogers sighed, “And I hate that the world is not safe for him.”

“We’ll keep him safe.” Romanov declared calmly.

“Like hell we’re letting the world hurt him.” Rhodes agreed.

A vow. An oath. A promise unto death.

Chapter 36: Chapter 35

"Master Clint," Jarvis' voice pulled Clint away from his movie, "Mister Parker is at a breaking point in his project. You wished to be alerted."

"Thanks, Jarvis." Clint pushed himself to his feet.

"What?" Sam frowned, "Who's Peter?"

"I've got an Intern." Clint replied.

"Tony gave you an Internship?" Sam blinked.

"No." Clint shook his head, "Not an Internship. An Intern."

"Is that even legal?" Sam asked, "Forget that. *Why*?"

"Who knows why Tony does anything?" Clint fired back, "But the important thing is that he works on the R&D floors. And unofficially or officially or technically or *what* he's counted as mine."

"You can get him to keep an eye out for Tony." Sam realized.

"Exactly." Clint nodded, "Okay, it's not as good as one of us… And he can't do it all the time. But it's better than nothing."

Clint made his way down to the R&D floor that he could usually find Peter on. Inwardly he was hoping that this plan of his would be accepted by the younger man. But also and equally that it wouldn't be needed.

"Hey, Peter," Clint called out as he saw the Intern making his way down the corridor, in the opposite direction to the Archer, "You got a minute? I need a word."

"Look, Clint," Peter smiled, "I'm starving. You want to talk? Join me for a pizza? I know a good local joint."

"Sure." Clint agreed.

Peter's pizza joint was a little 'hole-in-the-wall' place. Clearly a family business. But the interior was bright and clean. The whole place smelt of freshly cooked food. Peter was clearly well known as he was greeted warmly.

Peter led Clint to a small booth, tucked away in a corner, where they would not be easily disturbed.

It didn't take long for both of them to place their order and then for a few moments they sat in comfortable silence.

"Kid," Clint leaned forward slightly, "I was hoping to ask you a favour."

"Ask away." Peter shrugged, "I won't promise anything though. Except to listen."

"You know that there's people trying to grab Tony," Clint explained, "I'd like you to keep an eye out for anything and anyone acting strange on the R&D floors for me. Just in case they try that way. I mean I trust Jarvis, but I'd rather have some human instincts and gut watching out for him."

"I'll do what I can." Peter replied, "Spread the word as well. More eyes, better chance."

"I'm not sure I trust everyone," Clint confessed, "I mean everyone's had background checks, but…"

"Look," Peter smiled softly, "We all love Tony. I know it might not seem it. But everyone in that building loves him. From what I've heard, it's company wide. We adore Pepper… But Tony? We love him. We're not always happy about his private life. About his indiscretions. I've heard more than one complaint about his former playboy ways. But he always does his best by us. That's what I've heard. And what I've experienced so far.

"From what I gather, no-one really liked Stane personally. He was good for the business. But not liked. But everyone accepted that. He was the boss you moaned about, but kept working for, because you liked everything else about your job *except* him.

"Tony's different. He *cares* about us. Knows our names. Knows our families. The pay is top notch and the benefits like no other. And Tony cares for us.

"You won't find one person in that building who doesn't like him. From the janitor to Pepper. He shows us the one thing he never really shows the rest of the world… The fact that he has a heart. Why he feels he has to hide it, I don't know. And I really don't get. But he does, so I have to accept that. We all know he's broken inside somehow. I've heard rumours

that he was broken before Afghanistan… That Afghanistan just made the cracks more visible."

"You're exaggerating." Clint shook his head, "Or projecting. They don't all care like that."

"Receptionists and secretaries have been deflecting women with eyes set far too high for more years than you think." Peter returned, "And they weren't asked to. The security guards won't even let anyone from Hammer or Killian into any building. That's without being told. And don't get me *started* on what they'd do to Stone. There are *always* blueberries in some form or another available in every common room, in every cafeteria, across the whole company. If the media is having another go at him, or singing the praises of Howard there's suddenly a technical thing that needs his input immediately. *Always*. Quite an effective distraction actually. And on the really bad days, when he needs to be alone or to be with Steve or you or anyone he counts as family… Nothing goes wrong. Ever.

"Look, we look out for him where we can. And we do what we can to help. Every one of us. From Billy to Pepper. Lowest to highest."

"You know Billy the Janitor?" Clint blinked in surprise.

"We're about the same age," Peter shrugged, "We've hung out before now. He's… Not like other people. He's… Older. More mature. I'm one of the ones who gets the alert though."

"Alert?" Clint was decidedly confused.

"You know he calls himself a ninja?" Peter offered, "Well sometimes he does routines in the staff gym. And they are something to behold. You could almost believe his claim watching him. He is… Ridiculously skilled."

"He spars?" Clint pressed.

"No," Peter shook his head, "Well… Once, with Jimmy. A security guard. It was like watching ballet… Really violent ballet. But usually he just runs through routines. The alert is if someone spots him. He tries to avoid the crowds. There's no cameras in the gym… Well, one on the door that sends signals to the security office and is recorded. The rest only send picture to Jarvis. So we can't watch him that way. You get the alert, you *move*! I once came all the way from my home to watch Billy. He's *that* good."

"Does he teach?"

"Never." Peter shrugged, "But sometimes… He'll let you copy. Sometimes he'll tell you that you need to work on a particular move. Sometimes he's even paired two people up and told them to work with each other… Jimmy does the same. They won't teach. And Jimmy rarely spars. Everyone moves to watch when he does."

“Everyone?”

“Well, all the security guards and such like. They text me when it’s going on.”

“Why? You’re an Intern. A scientist.”

“Billy and I are friends. We’re similar ages like I said. And we don’t quite belong in any particular group. We sort of drifted together. I’ve hung out in his room a couple of times. The guards know we’re close. Or closer than we are to anyone else. Apart from you, for me. So they alert me when Billy’s doing something that’s worth watching.”

There was an amused little smile on Peter’s face.

“You’ve never tried to ask Billy to teach you?”

“No.” Peter shook his head, “I know he won’t. So I don’t bother asking.”

Conversation was interrupted by their food arriving.

“I wanted to talk with you.” Peter started a new conversation.

“What about?” Clint was curious.

“This.” Peter pulled his bag onto his lap and dug around for a while.

Clint saw parts of the bag shift, indicating that whatever Peter was looking for was hidden in the bag, possibly in a secret section that he’d not noticed before. The Archer couldn’t help but tense in anticipation of something dangerous coming out of the bag. Even though there had been no tells in Peter’s body language.

Once bitten. Twice shy.

And Clint had been bitten *far* too often by people he trusted and liked.

But what Peter pulled out was a bundle of what looked like fabric. He paused for a moment, clearly second guessing himself about what he was about to do. Then he just shrugged and handed it over.

Clint ran his hands over the fabric. It was soft, but seemed to be fairly strong. The colour was red, with some sort of black line design. He flattened it out. It seemed to be a hood or a cowl of some sort. It was clearly meant to cover the entire head. The black lines ran all over the fabric. Clint turned it around in his hands to get a full look at it.

Two white eyes stared back at him.

Clint screwed up the fabric and lobbed it back across the table, without even thinking.

"Think we could change the name Avengers to 'The Tony Stark Protection League'?" Peter… No, *Spiderman* asked with a grin on his lips and a smirk in his voice.

"How?" Clint demanded, traces of Agent Barton slipping through in his tone.

"Spider bite." Peter shrugged.

"I don't think that's a usual side-effect." Clint fired back, almost automatically.

"Genetically modified." Peter elaborated, "I don't know what they were *trying* to do. I only know what it *did* do."

"Why?" Clint was hitting the high points of his list of questions.

"Because I had power. Because others didn't. Because my Uncle died. Because I didn't."

"Okay," Clint breathed out, "You're going to have to go back a few steps and fill in some of the details. Because I didn't get *any* of that."

"I suddenly got stronger and faster." Peter explained, "I've never had much money, so I decided to make a quick buck."

Clint felt his muscles tense. He didn't want to hear that Peter had done something wrong. He didn't. It didn't gel with what he knew of the kid. But he knew there were limited ways to earn a quick buck. And almost all of them weren't legal.

“I did some amateur wrestling.” Peter carried on, seemingly oblivious to Clint’s fear, “For the prize money. It wasn’t much, but…”

“I used to enter archery competitions.” Clint confessed, relieved that Peter’s crime wasn’t even a crime at all.

“A thief robbed the place.” Peter continued, “I did nothing. I could have stopped him. Would have been easy. But it wasn’t my problem. So I did nothing.”

“Understandable.” Clint stated.

Yes, it wasn’t a good thing to have done. But it wasn’t bad either. It was just neutral. A civilian wasn’t expected to stop a robbery.

“I should have stopped it.” Peter murmured.

“Wasn’t your job.” Clint reminded.

“Still should have done something.” Peter shrugged, “Because he killed my uncle when he robbed him, not even a couple of hours later.”

Clint froze. The very simplicity of the statement was chilling. No wonder the kid concentrated on the little crimes.

“Great power,” Peter carried on, “Great responsibility. I failed once. I won’t fail again.”

“You didn’t fail.” Clint countered.

“I let my uncle die.”

“Not your fault.”

“I could have stopped him.”

“And I killed my brother.” Clint opened up, “I was a criminal for a while. A gun for hire… Well, arrow in my case. I was a high level hitman and only took contracts where I felt it was appropriate. My brother worked for a gang. One of the first jobs I did, I took out every guard between me and the target. It wasn’t until later that I realized one of them was my brother. I could have stopped him from becoming a gang member. I could have. But I didn’t.

I could have not killed everyone between me and the target. I could have. But I didn't. That's on me."

"You didn't know."

"Nor did you." Clint reminded, "Look, it sucks. I get that. I get that better than nearly anyone. But it's in the past. And you're doing what you can to protect other people. I reckon your uncle would be proud of you."

Clint could tell by Peter's face that he wasn't convinced by Clint's words. But also that the teen wasn't going to argue with him. So Clint made a mental note to give the kid positive feedback wherever possible.

"I don't think Fury will appreciate the name change," Clint turned the conversation back to a safer topic, "Although I will agree it's apt."

"That's why I decided to tell you." Peter declared, "So that you know I care for Tony as well. For different reasons, but I care for him. He's like a crazy uncle who turns up every so often and then vanishes again."

"My brother." Clint grinned, "I guess you don't want SHIELD to know about you."

"If possible." Peter agreed.

"What about the others?"

"Your discretion?" Peter suggested, "I don't really mind, but I wanted you to know."

"Why now?"

"You actually care." Peter sounded almost surprised, "You care about me and about other people. When I first found out who you were, I wasn't sure. I thought you might have befriended Tony with an ulterior motive. But the more I saw… The less I believed it. Watching how you reacted to Tony being threatened… Well, I knew you were being honest about your intentions. So I decided to trust you."

"Oh, there was no motive behind it." Clint snorted, "Steve just saw a face he fancied. And it became something more. He didn't know anything unless I told him or Tony did. That was how he wanted it."

"And somehow the rest of you just formed around him." Peter snorted.

"You did too." Clint reminded, "Tony just has that way. A natural charisma. He draws people to him."

“No,” Peter shook his head, “Charisma, yes. But there’s also a strange sort of vulnerableness. We *know* he can’t protect himself from everything. Even if he’s determined to try.”

“God!” Clint laughed, “He must remind Steve of Steve. When he was little and scrawny. By the way, how’d you get back into the Tower? It was on Lockdown… How?”

“There’s a few vents,” Peter shrugged, “In camera blind-spots. Virtually impossible to get to unseen, but I managed. The ductwork itself isn’t easy either. You need my level flexibility to get through them unhurt. Plus you need to know about it in the first place. I figured it out, because I’m always looking for how to get in and out of places. I have to.”

“I get it, kid.” Clint nodded, “I just needed to make sure.”

“That no-one else could.” Peter nodded, “I get it.”

123456789

The revelation about Spiderman/Peter made the next week and a bit pass with less tension and worry than there would have been, at least for Clint. He wasn’t one to go telling other people’s secrets.

Simply the knowledge that there was an extra pair of eyes keeping watch over Tony in an area where the others were less likely to be (Bruce generally keeping to his own private lab) made thing seem easier.

But that couldn’t change the tension level rising when Tony was set to go off to Hawaii.

“I’ll check in every night, Steve.” Tony promised.

“And every morning?” Steve pressed gently.

“I’d be calling you at four or earlier.” Tony countered.

“I don’t care.” Steve replied, “I get up at stupid o’clock, remember?”

“Sparrow’s fart.” Tony agreed, “Okay, but I’ll be fine. I’ve got Coulson and his boyband looking after me. No one knows I’m going to Hawaii. Everything is under false names. I’m going as Edward Rogers, a SI expert in Arc Reactors. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll miss you.” Steve murmured, “Will you miss me?”

“Like a fibre gone from my heart.” Tony’s voice was soft, but honest, “I love you.”

“I know.” Steve whispered into Tony’s hair.

Clint felt uncomfortably like a voyeur as he watched the goodbyes. Feigning he was saying goodbyes of his own to Phil.

Not that he *wasn’t* saying goodbye. But they were also saying a lot *more*.

“Twenty men.” Phil muttered into Clint’s ear, “Tony’s only aware of four. And I’m sharing his room.”

“I wish I could come.” Clint whispered.

“Too risky.” Phil countered, “Tony could figure something out. Besides we need you here for Iron Man. He’s getting bolder.”

“I know.” Clint sighed, “His attacks are increasing in size.”

“And the Winter Soldier is getting closer to killing someone.” Phil breathed, “He almost took Rollins’ shoulder out permanently.”

Clint suppressed a shudder. It could have been him. It *should* have been him. That was the worst part. The Avengers had been sent off chasing Doctor Doom, *again*. So when Iron Man and the Winter Soldier had started causing trouble, Rumlow’s STRIKE team had been sent instead.

The pair of Supervillains had taken them down… Hard.

Rumlow was still off with a broken leg, caused when he fell from his perch on top of a building. He’d managed to use a grapple to save his life, but when going down the last little bit, the cord had been cut. A well-aimed knife severing it from a distance.

Rollins had gotten too close to Iron Man. The Winter Soldier had retaliated firmly. Not enough to kill… But enough to make sure that Rollins didn’t manage to use the short range

EMP grenade he had had in his hand.

"Fury believes it's only a matter of time before they try for the DC offices." Phil confided.

"Keep him safe?" Clint pleaded, "We'll deal with everything else."

"I know. I will."

123456789

It was on the morning of the fourth day after Tony and Phil had left that Clint found Steve knocking on his door.

"What?" Clint asked, bleary eyed.

"Tony hasn't called." Steve declared hurriedly, "Has Phil called you?"

"Steve," Clint rubbed his eyes, "It's early. What time is it?"

"It is five o'clock, Master Clint." Jarvis supplied easily.

"Five a-fricking-clock," Clint almost snarled at Steve, "That makes it, what? Nine, ten? They had that Luau thing last night. Phil said something about it going on for *hours*."

"But Tony has *never* called later than this." Steve countered.

"They were up late." Clint argued, "They're sleeping in. Tony told you that he'd finished what he needed to do. He probably partied all night. Been a while since he felt comfortable enough to celebrate. Phil told me the party was mainly the engineers and technicians from the plant. They're Tony's kind of people… Since Afghanistan he's been more comfortable with normal people than the upper class."

"No," Steve shook his head, "He's always been that way. But he would have called me."

"He's sleeping." Clint repeated.

However he wasn't certain. He felt an unsettled feeling in his gut. Something was wrong and he knew it. But he had to have faith. Faith that Phil was handling it. Faith that Phil had everything under control.

“Look,” Clint sighed, “Let’s go upstairs to the common area. You can make me breakfast. I’ll try to wake up. If we haven’t heard from them in half an hour, *then* we can panic. Okay?”

“Alright.” Steve conceded, “But I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

You and me both, Clint thought. But he would never say it.

Half an hour later the two of them had been joined by Sam, who, bereft of his normal running partner, had gone looking for Steve.

Steve was picking at his breakfast pancakes, while Clint was operating under the principle that he would need the energy later. Sam had declared that if he wasn’t going running he needed *something* to help him wake up properly, so coffee would have to do.

“Master Steve,” Jarvis spoke up, “There is a call on the landline, would you like to answer it?”

“Is it Tony?” Steve asked.

Clint knew it wasn’t. Jarvis wouldn’t have asked if it were Tony. He would have just put Tony through.

“No, Master Steve,” Jarvis replied, “It is a call from Iolani Palace. Though which particular extension I have not yet determined. If you desire I can put them on hold and identify which of the many phone lines it is from and thus who is calling.”

“Just put them through.” Steve instructed.

“Of course, Master Steve.” Jarvis acknowledged.

“Hello, who is this?” Steve spoke to thin air.

It still seemed weird to Clint that Tony had the entire place wired so that he could talk on his phone without having a phone on him in *every* freaking room of the private floors. Jarvis

could even tune a person in or out, depending on who was on the phone. So you could be in the room while someone else was talking and never be heard.

"Lieutenant Commander McGarrett, Five-Oh," The speaker declared, "I am trying to contact Clinton Steven."

"What is this regarding?" Steve asked.

"Edward Rogers." McGarrett replied, "Am I speaking to Clinton Rogers?"

"In a manner of speaking," Steve answered, "Is it possible to turn this into a video call. I prefer to seek whom I'm talking with."

"Of course," McGarrett agreed easily, "Give me a moment."

About twenty seconds later, the TV screen displayed what was clearly a military man, despite his casual dress of black jeans and a blue t-shirt. What looked like a black tribal tattoo peaked out from under the t-shirt. The dark hair was cropped military short as well.

"Which one of you is Clinton Steven?" McGarrett questioned.

"It's not Clinton Steven," Clint replied, "Its Clint and Steve. I'm Clint. Blond is Steve."

"I'm Sam." Sam piped up, "And you're confused. So am I. What is a Navy man doing calling us?"

"Five-Oh," Clint shrugged, "Governor's Task Force for Hawaii. Led by Lieutenant Commander Steven Jack McGarrett. Formerly US Navy. Now in the Reserves. Head of the Five-Oh Task Force."

Everyone turns to stare at him.

"Phil does his research!" Clint protested, "It just stuck with me."

No need to mention that Clint's auditory memory was damn near perfect. He'd trained it to be. Poor literacy skills as a child had meant that learning by listening was a lot easier than reading.

If he could hear it, he could remember it.

"What *exactly* am I missing here?" McGarrett demanded.

"Edward Rogers doesn't exist." Steve sighed, "It's a false identity. One that was being used by my husband; Tony Stark. What has happened?"

"Last night the Governor was attending a Luau along with Edward Rogers and many other SI employees." McGarrett stated, "None of them have been seen since. Do you have any information about what might have happened? Have you been contacted at all?"

"No," Steve shook his head, "Tony's been checking in with me every morning and night. I knew something was wrong when he didn't call this morning. I last spoke to him last night. Before the party. Nothing was wrong. He was upbeat. Happy. He'd done his job, I think. He was keeping a secret. But it wasn't anything bad. He can't lie to me."

Clint wasn't so sure about that. He was fairly certain that Tony kept secrets and lied to Steve… To all of them.

But it wasn't about anything serious. Tony wouldn't do that to them. It wasn't his style. It wasn't his nature.

He cared for them too much to deceive them with malicious intent… So it wouldn't be about anything serious.

"Steve," A voice from off camera called out, "Fong called. There's an issue with the DNA… Steve, why are we video conferencing with two military guys and a civilian warrior?"

"What?" McGarrett blinked, even as a shorter blond man walked into shot.

"Sorry, who are you?" Steve asked, "And how do you know my name?"

"You're Steve too?" The newcomer was surprised, "Steve is McGarrett's first name. This could get confusing. I'm Detective Williams. Who are you? And what is your relation to this case?"

“I am Steve Stark,” Steve replied, “Tony Stark’s husband. Edward Rogers being a false identity being used by Tony for this trip.”

“And nobody thought to give us a heads up about that, *because*?” Williams stared, “Never mind, it’s too late for that now. What was his security detail like?”

“Security detail?” McGarrett frowned.

“There was either a kidnap attempt or an assassination attempt less than a month ago,” Williams waved his hands around slightly, “Completely destroyed the lobby of his home. No one knows who or why. Of *course* he had a security detail. It would have been better if we had known he was coming, because then we wouldn’t have been caught flat-footed like this.”

“Twenty one.” Clint supplied, “He had a detail of twenty one.”

“Twenty two.” Sam shook his head, “He took Happy as well.”

“Happy?” McGarrett asked.

“Harold Hogan.” Steve answered, “Head of Security for SI.”

“The rest are employees under him?” Williams pressed, “What are their contracts like?”

“They are not part of SI.” Clint returned, forcibly calm, “Outsiders.”

“Contract?” Williams blinked, “What agency?”

“Classified.” Clint bit back any further details.

“One of the Alphabet Agencies then.” Williams sighed, “Please tell me it’s not the CIA.”

“No,” Sam smiled, “Why? Don’t you like them?”

“They kidnapped me once.” Williams shrugged, “I doubt all of the detail would have gone to the Luau.”

“We don’t know the set up.” Steve answered, “I didn’t want to know.”

“Why?” McGarrett frowned.

“We work in security.” Clint replied, “If we’d known, we’d know how to take it down. That would make us worry more.”

“If we assume that they were working shifts of eight hours,” Williams started to ponder aloud, “And that at any one time they had at least two people securing Tony’s room… I make that three maybe four people with Tony at the Luau. That means we have as many as

seventeen people unaccounted for, that we didn't know about before, who have *not* checked in… Chin!"

"Yes, Danny?" Another voice came over the call.

"Take Kono and check out the hotel Rogers was staying at again." Williams instructed.

"We looking for anything in particular?" The question was fired back.

"Seventeen dead bodies." Williams returned, "At most. Rogers had a security detail of twenty two. And not all of them were at the beach."

"SI is careful with their employees." The voice remarked almost appreciatively.

"They do when Rogers is actually Tony Stark." Williams retorted.

"Right. So we're looking for a seriously well organised and well-armed group." The speaker remarked, "This was not something thrown together overnight. Most likely an international organisation."

"Can we be certain about that?" McGarrett argued, "They could simply be after a ransom."

"You don't go after Tony Stark for a ransom." Williams countered, "Never in a million years."

"He's a billionaire." McGarrett disputed.

"But it is his *mind* that is far more valuable." Williams' hands were going at full throttle, "The man is a genius."

"I thought that was pure hype." McGarrett frowned.

"Not at all." Steve interrupted, "He is *far* smarter than the rumours."

"Abandoned warehouses." Williams declared, "We start with those. The ones nearest the shore."

"Why those?" Clint frowned.

"No vehicles were caught on camera leaving the scene large enough to remove all the people at the Luau." Williams shrugged, "It was on the beach… Makes sense to use the water. And if you don't want to move someone too far, using a beachfront warehouse is logical."

"They could have just dumped everyone else." McGarrett pointed out.

"Doubtful," Williams shook his head, "At least *one* body would have washed up by now. Plus if they wanted to kill everyone they could have done it on the beach."

“Could be worried about people finding the bodies.” Clint countered.

“No,” McGarrett disagreed, “Private beach. Wouldn’t have had anyone stumble across the bodies. Not for several days. Danny, what’s Fong’s issue with the DNA?”

“Really, McGarrett?” Williams’ eyebrow rose, “In front of them? Discussing ongoing case details?”

“We’ve been doing it already.” McGarrett argued.

“Not to this extent.” Williams reminded, “Nothing that they didn’t know already or could figure out. Apart from the fact that people are missing.”

“Detective Williams,” Steve pulled himself up to his full height, “This is a case involving my husband. I am literally on the other side of the country to Hawaii. I have not left New York in the last two days. I highly doubt I can be considered to be involved. However Tony Stark is my husband. I have the right to know what is going on.”

“Quite frankly, Mister Stark, I trust *nobody* with Tony’s safety. I am of the belief that *nobody* has the right to know what is going on with him. Not his husband.” Williams had stopped moving and pulled himself up to *his* full height, which was at least a foot shorter than Steve. Not that height translated all that well on the vid-screen.

“You know Tony.” Sam blinked in surprise, “You’re defensive of him. Protective. When did you meet?”

“Officially we never have.” Williams replied, “We will contact you when we have more information. Until then, this conversation is over.”

Williams’ fingers danced over the computer table and the connection went dead.

Chapter 37: Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Jarvis," Steve's eyes narrowed, "Find out when Detective Williams and Tony interacted."

"Spring Break," Clint piped up, "Has to be. I know he went to Hawaii on Spring Break one year."

"Negative, Master Clint." Jarvis countered, "Detective Williams is originally from New Jersey, having only moved to Hawaii in the last few years. I can be more precise if you so desire. During his time in Hawaii, Sir has not been in Hawaii himself. I cannot find any instance in Sir's schedule and Detective Williams' records where they would have interacted. However my records are not as accurate for the period of time before I was brought online."

"Ignore that for now." Steve waved a hand, "Can you find out what the problem with the DNA is?"

"Of course, Master Steve," Jarvis' voice was calm, "Hacking HPD systems."

"Shouldn't we be objecting to Jarvis breaking the law?" Sam asked.

"I just hope he's discrete." Clint shrugged, "I'll have to contact SHIELD. Check that they are aware."

"I knew something was wrong." Steve murmured.

"Sorry." Clint whispered.

"Master Steve," Jarvis spoke up again, "I have identifies the DNA anomaly. HPD discovered two blood pools at the site of the Luau. One has yet to be matched against any profile in CODIS; however I can categorically state that it is not Sir's. The other has returned a report of 'Classified'."

"Blood?" Steve paled.

"The larger blood pool," Jarvis continued, "Is the unidentified blood pool, and judging by the amount discovered at the scene, it is highly doubtful that the victim is still alive. The smaller blood pool, as I have mentioned, belongs to a Classified person, according to the Hawaii Crime Lab the amount loss is less than a pint. There is an annotation that you would lose more going to the Blood Bank; certainly survivable. There was a lack of blood leading away from the smaller blood pool, indicating that it was treated to some degree."

"Classified," Clint breathed, "Most likely a SHIELD Agent."

"Jarvis," Sam spoke up, "Do you have any way of locating Tony?"

“Of course, Master Sam,” Jarvis responded, “However I have not conclusively located Sir. His phone is turned off and I cannot reactivate it nor its internal GPS system. His Power Bands are currently reporting two very different locations.”

“What are those locations?” Steve demanded.

“One is stationary in a warehouse district of Hawaii,” Jarvis answered, “Specifically on Sand Island, formerly known as Quarantine Island. The second is currently making its way towards Los Angeles, California, if it continues on its current course.”

“Plane?” Sam pressed.

“Most likely a boat of some kind, Master Sam.” Jarvis countered, “Considering that it is moving much slower than a plane would be. I anticipate it arriving in Los Angeles in less than one hour. I am forwarding this information to Honolulu PD, particularly the Five-Oh taskforce.”

“Forward it to SHIELD as well.” Clint knew it was too late to stop Jarvis from telling Five-Oh, but he could at least make sure it went to the right people.

Not that Five-Oh wasn’t good, but this was *way* out their league.

About ten minutes later Clint’s phone rang. He didn’t recognise the number, but answered it.

“Barton.” He answered it formally.

“Clinton.” Phil’s reassuring tones came across the line.

The use of Clint’s full name told him that it wasn’t a secured line and civilians were within earshot. However they weren’t deemed a threat.

“What happened?” Clint asked.

“They drugged the punch.” Phil replied, “I didn’t drink any. Nor did Tony. Others were… Less sensible. I’ll be having *words* with people later; I sounded the alarm, but no one responded.”

“There’s a chance they were taken out first.” Clint stated, “Five-Oh is checking the hotel. You didn’t notice?”

“Reaction times were the only thing really affected. Slowed down. Almost mimicked alcohol, only worse. I managed to get my gun out. Hogan tried to rush one of them. Give Tony an escape route. They didn’t even bother shooting him. He’s on his way to the hospital with a concussion. It’s… Bad.”

“What about Tony?” Clint pressed.

“He was definitely the target.” Phil sighed, “They honed in on him. I tried to protect him. He bargained for our lives with his agreement to go with them. Threatened to bite off his tongue and choke to death on the blood if they didn’t give in. He was… Rather graphic in his description.”

“Always knew he could get a little morbid. And a *lot* protective.” Clint had to smother a smile, “So everyone’s alright?”

“I… I was shot. Leg wound. Through and through. Tony patched it up, before they took him. Slipped one of his bracelets onto my wrist. That how you found me?”

“Yes. You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” Phil repeated, “We need to locate Tony. It was AIM. And they *clearly* had prior warning that we would be here.”

“Why aren’t you on the way to the hospital?”

“Who says I’m not? The medics are *not* happy with me being on the phone.” Phil snorted slightly, “I’ve contacted the Director. And you avoided my instruction.”

“The other band is nearing Los Angeles.” Clint supplied, “SHIELD has the intel.”

“You keep him safe.” Phil commanded, “You go keep him safe.”

“Sir, yes sir.” Clint smirked, “Not like I’m not already heading that way already.”

“Don’t be a wiseass.” Phil reprimanded teasingly.

“I thought that was what you liked about me.” Clint snorted.

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Just over an hour later, Hawkeye was flying a Quinjet to Los Angeles. They were about half an hour out from their destination, and the predominant thought running through his brain was that they needed to get Tony to upgrade the wretched things!

It should *not* take a little over an hour and a half to fly from New York to Los Angeles. The Blackbird could do it in a shade over an hour, so why couldn't SHIELD work towards that as a target?

In the back section of the Quinjet, Captain America, the Falcon, Thor, Doctor Banner and Spiderman sat quietly waiting. The Black Widow was in the seat next to him, just in case.

The lack of conversation was more due to the underlying tension in the air.

In actuality the Avengers didn't need to make this trip. The SHIELD Agents in California could easily secure Tony and move him safely back to New York. But the Avengers didn't feel comfortable with that as a group.

In some strange way Tony had become a sort of private mascot to the team. Even the Black Widow had warmed up to him, once she'd gotten more exposure to him. Seen his more hidden, vulnerable side. And she'd really changed her tune, when she'd seen him turn down and/or flinch away from over a dozen sexual proposals after the Battle of New York.

Hawkeye noticed when Spiderman got up from his seat and wandered towards the cockpit. The teen barely aware of the turbulence which would have knocked any normal person off their feet. Clearly climbing to walls was not the only way the teen used his ability to stick to things.

"Hawkeye," Spiderman's voice was questioning, "Is it possible to contact the LA Office of SHIELD. I'd feel better knowing that they'd picked Tony up."

"They will have done so." The Black Widow half-reprimanded.

"I know that." Spiderman shrugged, "But I'd feel better if they *confirmed* that. It's a thing with me, okay?"

"Proof?" Hawkeye offered, getting where Spiderman was coming from. A scientist wanting to confirm a known theory, "Alright. Give me a moment."

He quickly flicked a few switches, connecting the Quinjet with the LA branch.

“This is Hawkeye of the Avengers Initiative.” Hawkeye spoke clearly, “Can you please confirm that you have picked up Stark?”

“Stark?” The question came back immediately, “He’s not in LA. We’d have been informed if he had. Why would we have him? Why are asking us if we do?”

Hawkeye felt the blood drain from his face.

“This is the Black Widow,” His partner took over immediately, “Assistant Director Hill contacted your Regional Director approximately an hour and a quarter ago. You were to be instructed to pick up Mister Stark from his kidnappers when they docked. A locating device providing Mister Stark’s precise location was also provided.”

“The Regional Director for the West Coast,” The Agent spoke gently, “Had a heart attack a bit over an hour ago. He’d just called in a leader of a STRIKE team to discuss something when he dropped down. He was pronounced in the last five minutes. We had no idea that Stark was kidnapped. Never mind that they were headed in our direction. We’ve been scrambling to try and keep the Regional Director alive. None of us thought that the mission he wanted the STRIKE team for was particularly urgent.”

“Well it is,” Hawkeye snapped, “Stark. Kidnapped. Last night. Boat. Your direction. Should have docked about a quarter of an hour ago. Check in with Assistant Director Hill for the precise location. Get that STRIKE team moving *now*!

Hawkeye barely registered the quick reassurances that the STRIKE team would be moving, before he turned the link off. He really, *really* wanted something to hit right then. Or shoot.

Shooting would be better.

“Fuck!” Hawkeye snapped. Getting a lot of stress out in that one word.

Silence reigned in the Quinjet as all of them tried to take in what they had just heard. It seemed impossible. A fluke of timing.

Hawkeye couldn't quite ignore the unsettled feeling in his gut that told him it was something more. But he knew he had no reason for the feeling. After all it was SHIELD, they were the good guys. None of them would benefit from Tony being in the wrong hands.

"How?" Spiderman breathed, "How can that happen?"

"Heart-attacks can come from nowhere." Doctor Banner shrugged.

"No…" Spiderman looked like he wanted to run a hand through his hair, "I meant… How could someone else not know? Isn't there a protocol to prevent stuff like this?"

"Not that I know of." Hawkeye shrugged, "Coulson would know better. This shouldn't have happened though. I'm sure of that."

"How could they assume it wasn't time sensitive?" The Captain whispered in a voice that shouldn't have carried, yet did.

"Fear not, Brother Steve," Thor boomed, "We shall rescue thy husband, our Tony of Stark. We shall protect him. Not one villain shall lay a finger on him. I swear this to you, Brother Steve."

"Thanks Thor." The Captain managed to get out.

"Easy, Captain." The Falcon laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, "We'll get Tony back. We'll piece him back together."

"You think he'll be broken?" Doctor Banner breathed.

"I think that Tony's retreated after every time he's been held prisoner before." The Falcon shrugged, "He had issues even *before* Afghanistan. Pepper and Rhodey take into account some of his quirks far too easily."

"The whole thing about taking things from people?" Spiderman remarked, "Yeah, I noticed."

"How?" Steve frowned, pulling back his cowl, "How could you have known that? How did you even notice that?"

"I…I…" Spiderman cast a glance towards Hawkeye.

"Hey," Hawkeye flashed a grin, "You told me in confidence. I don't speak out of turn."

"I said you could." Spiderman reminded.

"Still wasn't my secret to tell." Clint pointed out, taking off his mask.

He couldn't keep Hawkeye up. Not when he was this angry. He needed a way to vent. Clint could do that a lot easier than Hawkeye.

Spiderman glanced around, then sighed and pulled off his mask.

"Peter?" Steve breathed, "I never even…"

"I'm invested in Tony." Peter stated, "I care about him. Okay? I'm not going to let someone hurt him. Don't think just because I don't live in your Tower that I don't care about him. There's quite a few of us who keep an eye out for him. Who care about him. We're just not all in a position to *do* anything to help most the time… At least not for the big stuff."

"Others?" Natasha leaned back towards the conversation, her curiosity peaked.

"Mostly SI employees," Peter answered, "Though on the Hero side, the X-men are somewhat protective of him. Wolverine especially. And I don't get why. Neither does he apparently. The Fantastic Four are protective in their own way. Even if Richards and Tony don't really get along most the time. Of all people, Daredevil was the one that surprised me the most. But apparently Tony's been putting money into Hell's Kitchen for a while. And he only stepped things up after the Battle of New York. Daredevil appreciates people who honestly try to help. With no ulterior motive. I don't know how he knows, but he said that Tony is honest in his desire to help."

"How many heroes do you *know* kid?" Sam breathed, "And how?"

"I was having issues with my powers at one point," Peter shrugged, "So I went to Xavier's place. He couldn't help, but we still talk. I got caught up in a portal and met the Fantastic Four. We still talk as well. Johnny even comes to hang out with me in costume sometimes. Daredevil and I bumped heads over a kidnapping. We don't meet a lot, but there's times… After the Foyer Incident I asked all of them to keep an eye and ear out for anything. I was a little surprised at their willingness, at first, but they all had their reasons, which they gave easily enough."

"Verily Brother Spiderman," Thor beamed, "You have proven yourself to be a skilled Ambassador for our team. Our fellow warriors will no doubt assist us in this matter and others, should we ever be unable to face our foe alone."

"We won't need them this time." Natasha was firm, "However it is good to know that others acknowledge the value of our Tony."

"Acknowledge the value?" Peter snorted, "They're protective. Highly so. Though I get slightly disturbed by the fact that Deadpool seems to have an interest."

"Deadpool?" Clint breathed, "That nutter? He's even crazier than *Loki*!"

"Deadpool?" Steve frowned, "I've never heard of him."

“We like to try and keep the completely crazy away from you.” Natasha declared, “He’s also known as the Merc with a Mouth. He can drive someone close to suicide with just words coming out of his mouth.”

“Merc with a Mouth?” Banner frowned, “I think I’ve heard of him. Said to be impossible to kill.”

“Don’t know about that,” Sam shrugged, “But I’ve heard of him too. Think I even met him once. Wade Wilson. Came into the centre. Kept on talking and talking and talking. About things that made no sense. Worst was when he went on about decapitation of himself and an end credits scene. He was upsetting everyone else.”

“Was Tony there?” Peter asked.

“Yeah,” Sam realized, “He was. But that was back before I knew who he was. Back before I first cornered him. I don’t know if he spoke to Tony.”

“Maybe he did.” Clint suggested, “He might have realized who Tony was. Some crazy people see clearer than sane people.”

“None of this *matters*!” Steve snapped, “Tony’s out there. Captured. Alone. Possibly injured. God only knows *what* they’re doing to him! And all we’re doing is *chatting*!”

“No, Steve,” Natasha was firm, “We’re going to find him. We’re going to bring him home. It doesn’t matter what is happening to him right now, because we’re going to stop it.”

“And what if they kill him?” Steve challenged.

“They won’t.” Clint was firm, “Tony’s worth is in his genius. They’ll want to use that. And he’s stubborn. We all know that. Stubborn and fierce. And brave.”

“And smart,” Peter put in, “He got *himself* out of Afghanistan. Lord only knows how… What he built. But he got out. By himself. He gets a chance, he’ll go for it. And if we don’t find him by looking? That’s when we’ll find him. When he shows us where to look.”

“You have a great deal of faith in our Tony of Stark.” Thor acknowledged.

“The man is a genius,” Peter shrugged, “He may not be a warrior, but he is a fighter.”

“Stark men are made of Iron.” The line was chorused.

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“What do you *mean* we were beaten there by NCIS?” Captain America glowered, “What is NCIS? Why do they have any information about this case?”

“You might know them better as NIS.” One of the older Agents supplied.

Captain America continued to look blank.

“ONI?” The Black Widow offered.

“Office of Naval Intelligence?” The Captain cocked his head, “What have Navy *Spies* got to do with anything?”

“They’re more like Navy Cops these days,” The Agent shrugged, “Naval Criminal Investigative Service.”

“So how did Navy Cops get there before you?” The Falcon pressed.

“How did they even *know* anything?!” The Captain demanded.

“McGarrett,” Hawkeye supplied, “He’s a Seal. Navy. Probably has a few friends in NCIS.”

“We had to deal with Henrietta Lange.” Another Agent piped up, “We ended up calling the Director to negotiate with her.”

“Henrietta Lange?” The Captain frowned.

“Think Fury’s manipulation,” Hawkeye stated, “With Coulson’s competence and the Black Widow’s deadliness. All combined into one little package. I mean seriously, she makes Stark look tall.”

“A fearsome warrior indeed.” Thor acknowledged.

“That’s not important.” The Captain snapped, “What do we know? Where is Tony?”

“He wasn’t there.” A female Agent spoke up, “NCIS reported that the boat only had two occupants. Neither of whom was Tony. However the vessel did slow down upon approach to LA. So it is possible that they transferred him to another craft. NCIS have the two in custody at present. The Director is negotiating access.”

“Black Widow,” The Captain breathed slowly, “You go see what you can do. Falcon, go with her. You deal better with organisations. We are *not* trying to infiltrate. We get in intel. We get Stark back. Thor, do a fly over. Anything suspicious report back. Do *not* charge in. There’s a lot that LA does differently. Spiderman…”

“I’ll partner with Thor.” Spiderman declared calmly, “I’ll do a swing around. See what I can see.”

“Good,” The Captain nodded, “Doctor Banner see if you can use the Arc Reactor to locate Stark again. Hawkeye…”

“I’m staying with you,” Hawkeye interrupted, “No offence Captain, but I’m not leaving you alone.”

“Fine,” The Captain gave in, “We’re going to be checking out Malibu.”

“Why Malibu?” Spiderman frowned.

“Because if I wanted to hide Tony somewhere where no one would look for him…” The Captain returned, his voice forcibly calm, “I’d hide him in his own house in Malibu.”

“You’ve actually given this some thought.” Hawkeye accused.

“More than once.” The Captain almost looked embarrassed about the confession.

Hawkeye didn’t have to think twice about why. He’d considered doing pretty much the same thing to Coulson on occasion. And they got more time together alone than Steve and Tony managed. There was always someone in their home. Tony had opened the doors to all of the Avengers who lived in the Tower, and they took advantage of it. Often preferring to hang out there than in their own quarters. Even Jane and Darcy wandered in and out.

Steve never objected. Tony neither. In fact the Genius seemed to enjoy having people he trusted around him. He seemed to thrive under the gentle care and attention. Sure he wasn’t anything *like* what the Public perception of him was, but he was turning more into a social person. More like the person Clint got glimpses of when Tony was with him or Steve or Rhodey or Pepper. But it was only ever glimpses. It was almost as if Tony was too scared to let his true self out. Though given his history, Clint couldn’t exactly blame the guy.

Clint wasn’t sure anyone else had noticed that Tony still wore one more mask, even when he had let the rest of his masks fall. But he was called Hawkeye for a reason. And even so it had taken him a long time to see the final mask.

However there were a few certainties that Clint, Barton and Hawkeye were sure of:

One, Tony loved Steve with everything he had.

Two, Tony would do *anything* to protect those he cared for.

Three, Tony had been hurt by too many people in his life to let anyone close easily.

Four, Patience would be the only way to get through Tony's masks.

So patience would be what Clint would have, until such time as Tony believed it. He would keep proving to Tony that he was worthy of his trust so that Tony would finally, *finally* let down that last mask, and let the world see exactly what sort of wonderful, generous, kind person he was.

A little voice in the back of his mind, which sounded worryingly like Darcy, pointed out that extending trust would work a lot better. That he should just tell Tony he was Hawkeye. Because then Tony might consider telling his secret that necessitated keeping that last mask in place.

Barton pondered what Tony's secret might be all the way to Tony's Malibu Home. He'd managed to narrow it down to something to do with Afghanistan, but no further than that. It was clearly some trauma Tony had experienced there, which still haunted him. Yet Tony clearly could find no easy way of discussing it with anyone else.

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With traffic it was just over two hours later that the pair arrived at the Malibu Mansion. The two of them didn't do a lot of talking. They were too tense to do so.

Hawkeye used the time to change back into his civilian clothes. He didn't want to step into Tony's territory as Hawkeye, but as Clint.

Besides, any kidnappers would underestimate Clint. They wouldn't underestimate Hawkeye.

Steve and Clint entered quickly clearing each room.

"Master Steve, Master Clint," Jarvis spoke up, "May I ask why you are here?"

“I thought the kidnappers might use this place as a hideout.” Steve sighed, “Because no one would think to look here.”

“Unfortunately I can confirm that no one has entered this Mansion since Sir left for Hawaii.” Jarvis stated.

“Tony hasn’t been to Malibu for a while,” Clint frowned, “Who’s been using this place then?”

“Mistress Pott has been known to use this Mansion when she is in LA.” Jarvis replied immediately.

“Of course,” Steve agreed, “Pepper has full range of all of Tony’s properties.”

“Then why doesn’t she live in the Tower?” Clint asked.

“Tony offered her a floor,” Steve shrugged, “She turned it down. Said she didn’t want to live so close to her work. Said Tony would be forever expecting her to sort stuff out. She got an apartment nearby instead.”

“I suppose it makes sense.” Clint conceded, “Probably saves money that way, not needing a hotel. Though what does she do for food?”

“Takeaway?” Steve suggested, “Well, he’s not here.”

“What happened to that car?” Clint stared, “It’s a wreck!”

“It was destroyed after Sir’s return from Afghanistan.” Jarvis replied, “Sir was working on some issues.”

“What?” Steve blinked.

“Old therapy.” Clint answered as they left the garage, “Take a sledgehammer to a wrecked car. Quite therapeutic actually. Bit like going to the shooting range. Though considering its Tony, I’m not surprised he took it to the next level.”

“Why would he destroy a perfectly good car?” Steve frowned, “Oh, wait, it’s Tony. He was probably going to fix it himself and forgot.”

“Sounds like Tony.” Clint grinned, “Now let’s go find him.”

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About a week later there was still no confirmed sign of Tony. The majority of the local investigation was being run by the NCIS team as they seemed to have a better grasp on the local area than SHIELD.

Which was something Barton was going to take up with SHIELD as soon as Tony was safe…

Well, no, he wouldn't. He would unleash Coulson and Romanov on them. It was much easier that way.

There'd been a couple bits of information. Sightings and such. Though the one torture video that they'd found had turned out to be a very convincing fake. Not that that bit of information had changed the fact that Captain America had gone and destroyed just about every punching bag in the place.

Despite Doctor Banner doing his best, even resorting to calling Reed Richards for help (a fact which stuck in Clint's throat), there was no way to use the Arc Reactor to locate Tony. It seemed that AIM had learnt from last time and were shielding it somehow.

War Machine had turned up late the first evening. It turned out that he had an agreement with Jarvis, where if Tony suddenly dropped off the grid, was gone significantly longer than he should be or was kidnapped that he would be contacted no matter where he was or what he was doing.

"I've got something!" Rhodes declared, running into the Ops Centre.

"What?" Captain America spun around to face him.

"God bless Tony's paranoia." Rhodes shrugged, "There's a subroutine in War Machine I didn't know about. Automatically alerts me if Tony sends a message out. And he sent a message."

Rhodes handed over a flash drive to one of the Tech Operators, Hawkeye thought the man was called Beadle. And the woman he often seemed to be talking to might have been Jones.

It was quickly plugged in and the sole file was shown on the screen. It was an audio file. Quickly it was played. Music came through the speakers.

“What the…?” Was the collective question.

“The MIT Drinking Song.” The Tech Operator spoke up, “I’m a CalSci grad myself. I’ll work on finding the source where this came from.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any hidden message in the soundtrack.” A female Tech Operator declared.

“You’re not looking for the right thing.” Rhodes sighed, “Tony’s a tricky son of a gun. Can you isolate certain tones?”

“Easily.” She replied, “Which ones?”

“Nobody tease me about this,” Rhodes cleared his throat, “This, this and this.”

He produced three perfectly clear notes.

“Okay.” Her fingers started to dance across the keyboard, in almost perfect harmony to the male’s.

“I’ve got a source!” Beadle declared, “Mobile phone.”

“Well done, Mister Beale,” Lange congratulated, “Now locate it.”

Beale, not Beadle. Well it was close enough.

“Already working on it.” Beale agreed.

“I’ve isolated the tones.” Jones(?) announced, “But there’s no message in them.”

“Not the way you’re reading them.” Rhodes leant over her slightly, “The high notes are short. The low notes are long. The mid-notes are breaks. Each syllable is separate beat.”

“This isn’t something just anyone would come across.” Jones(?) frowned.

“It’s Tony Code.” Rhodes shrugged, “He invented it during MIT. I never got the reason why. I think I’m the only person who knows about it.”

“Then why would he use it?” The floppy-haired agent asked.

“Because he’s Tony.” Rhodes replied, “He’s not sending a message to the world. He’s sending it to *me*. When I found him in Afghanistan I told him, next time he rode with me. He has very few people he trusts to get him out of these sorts of spots. I’m the one who’s been

with him the longest. So when he gets into these sort of messes, his default is me… Actually it's him, then me. I'm the longest standing fixture in Tony's life. And the only one left who hasn't hurt him. So, yeah… He's not calling for help. He's calling for me."

"That's Morse Code." Captain America watched the dots and dashes appearing on one of the screens, "T. S."

"N." The dark skinned agent also knew Morse Code it appeared, "But… That's not letters."

"It's binary." Rhodes agreed, "The N with the double break means the next section is numbers. And he always codes numbers in binary. Short are Zeros. Longs are Ones."

"Did he not *want* this code to be cracked?" The dark skinned agent muttered.

"Agent Hana," Lange reprimanded, "You know that intercepted codes can do a great deal of damage. Mister Stark is merely being cautious."

"Co-ordinates." Rhodes realized as he jotted down the numbers.

"You read binary?" Barton was surprised.

"Tony's former lab partner." Rhodes shrugged, "I read a lot of things that people wouldn't expect. Including ASL, Solresol, Elvish and Klingon. Binary? No problem."

Somehow that made sense. Even if Barton had no idea what Solresol was!

Though he made a mental note about the ASL. It might come in handy one day.

Rhodes handed the co-ordinates to Jones(?) who quickly worked to bring the location up on the screen. Just as Beale stood up to present his location. He slid the two maps over each other so that only one image could be seen, with two points virtually on top of each other. However they spread out as he zoomed in. But not too far.

"What are they doing in New Orleans?" Spiderman cocked his head to one side, "Have we been searching the wrong city?"

"The wrong state." The Black Widow agreed, "Why are there two locations? Shouldn't they be the same?"

"No," Rhodes shook his head, "My co-ordinates are where the phone first was able to connect to send the message. Beale's is the current location of that phone. Tony slipped the

program into it."

"How?" Beale asked, "They wouldn't have let him keep anything. Nothing that could store a program like this."

"He didn't need to." Rhodes shrugged, "Tony remembers everything he's ever programmed. And he types faster than you think. Plus he didn't need to program the whole thing. It's actually hidden on the deep web. He just needed to tell the phone where to find it. He'd have needed less than five minutes. Tony won't be with the phone though."

"How can you be sure, Colonel Rhodes?" Lange pressed.

"Because if he was, he would have called Jarvis." Rhodes replied, "He would have gotten himself back to New York."

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," Lange spoke up, "It seems that our guests have some travelling to do. Miss Jones, bring up the New Orleans Office."

"Right away." Jones nodded.

The screen cleared for a moment, before a new image appeared. Hawkeye took in the restricted view of a fairly open-plan office space. A man stood in the foreground looking upwards.

"Henrietta," The man smiled broadly, "And how can the New Orleans Office help you today? I take it this is not a social call."

"Agent Dwayne Pride," Lange nodded in acknowledgment, "We are sending two sets of co-ordinates to you. The moving location is a cell phone. The owner is believed to be involved in a kidnapping of a High Value Target. We need him alive. And he cannot alert anyone that we have detained him. They cannot even *suspect*."

"Of course," Pride agreed, "Who's the HVT?"

"Tony Stark." Lange replied calmly.

"Little Tony?" Pride jerked slightly, "Consider it done. There's a lot of reasons not to go home in the Big Easy. Very few of them related to the law."

"And we just hit pay-dirt." A new voice spoke up, "He's at a club. We move fast King, we could have him all wrapped up in a pretty bow before the hour's up."

"That's our cue." Pride smiled, "Send us the details Henrietta. You sending your team?"

“No, Dwayne,” Lange shook her head, “We’re working with one of our Sister Agencies on this case. Their team will be enroute to you. Find out where Tony is, if you can. But do *not* go after him, until they get to you.”

“I’d never put Tony at risk.” Pride declared firmly, “He’s a good kid. Send the team, Henrietta. We’ll have the location when they get here. LaSalle, grab Brodie. Let’s go learn things.”

The connection was cut.

“Seems he knows Stark.” An Agent spoke up, “Do you Hetty?”

“I was an acquaintance of his father’s.” Lange shook her head, “Howard found me intriguing.”

Barton hoped she didn’t mean what he though she meant. Because although he was okay with consenting adults, he did not need that image in his head. He would need a *lot* of brain bleach to deal with that.

“A concealed weapon on me is not exactly a concealed weapon.” Lange continued.

Barton relaxed slightly at that remark. It seemed it was completely innocent. And yes, he could see Howard being interested in a young, feisty Government Agent, of not exactly standard proportions.

“The man was an ass,” Lange hadn’t yet finished, “But man, what an ass.”

Yep, he was going to need some brain bleach, to get the image out of his head.

“Lady and Gentlemen,” Lange addressed the Avengers, “You had best get going. Special Agent Pride isn’t one to hang about. You don’t want to keep Tony waiting. Shoo.”

Still slightly in shock, both at the implication of Lange's words and her almost matronly dismissal of them, the Avengers started to traipse out of the room.

"Did she just imply…?" Spiderman tailed off.

"Yes." Two of the Agents chorused, as they accompanied the Avengers to the parking area.

"So she really…?" Spiderman couldn't quite put it into words (Not that Barton was blaming him).

"Don't know." One of the Agents shrugged.

"Not asking." The other finished.

"How much brain bleach do you get through here?" Spiderman queried, "Only… None of you did any more than blink."

"You get used to it."

"No, you really don't." The two Agents disagreed with each other.

"Look," The shorter of the two smiled, "Hetty is Hetty. We know her. We love her. Just every so often she breaks our brains."

"You go get Stark and get him home safe." The other Agent added.

In the end, that was all that needed to be said.

Chapter End Notes

Couldn't find a good place to stop. So this just went on for a fair bit. Hope you liked.

Chapter 38: Chapter 37

The NCIS team were clearly preparing for an assault when the Avengers arrived at the small New Orleans Office.

Hawkeye was slightly surprised that there were only three people present, but reckoned that they were only sending a token force, leaving the main attack for the Avengers.

"You're the team?" The younger of the two men asked.

"Yes," The Black Widow replied, "Where's the kidnapper? I will talk with him."

"No need." The woman countered, "We've got the location."

"Do you want the NOPD involved?" Pride asked.

"No." The Captain was firm, "A small group moving fast will get this done. We can take it from here."

"No," Pride shook his head, "You're going after Tony. We're coming with you."

"Stark is not involved with NCIS." War Machine countered, "You have no jurisdiction."

"One," Pride started ticking off on his fingers, "We picked up your kidnapper. Two, we know where we're going. Three, Stark supplied approximately ninety percent of the computer security for the Pentagon, so his kidnapping makes it a National Security Threat. Four, National Security Threat means it's us, Homeland Security or the FBI. Five, he's a friend. LaSalle, get Charmaine."

"Of course, King." The younger man moved to a safe and removed a box.

When it was opened, Hawkeye noted the good condition of the Nickle Plated Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver inside. Clearly old enough not to have been from the last batch, but not one of the originals either.

"Are we going to argue about this?" Pride raised an eyebrow, "Or are we going to get Tony back?"

It wasn't worth the argument. After all it was only three people. It wasn't as if NCIS was sending the entire office. They could be used to move Tony. Not that Hawkeye thought that the Captain would let anyone other than himself carry Tony out at first. Though Hawkeye could probably sell it with the advice that the Captain could protect Tony better if both his arms were free.

123456789

The French Colonial House must have looked quite grand at some point in its dim and distant past. But time and neglect had reduced it to a ruin of what it once was. Someone had clearly made an attempt at restoring it.

However the attempt just made it look even more worn and pathetic than it would have otherwise.

"Here?" The Falcon frowned.

"Hidden base underneath." LeSalle supplied softly.

"I would have thought that impossible." The Captain was surprised, "Given the soil conditions in this area."

"Anything's possible if you're determined enough." Pride shrugged.

"And have enough money." LeSalle agreed, "We gotta a tunnel under the city going nowhere and doing nothing."

"Entrance is through the coal cellar door." Brodie(?) declared, moving towards the side of the house.

"They don't have coal cellars in Louisiana." War Machine stated, "Do *not* ask me how I know."

"But the guy who set this place up wasn't a local." Pride countered, "So he saw a house without a coal cellar and added one."

"I'll… Stay with the cars." Doctor Banner decided, "I think the Hulk might not be a help right now."

"That's okay." The Black Widow reassured, "Your skills might be more useful should Tony be hurt."

It was a sobering thought, but one they had to consider. Who knew what had happened to Tony in the time they had taken to find him?

Silently the group made their way to the coal cellar doors and then down into the underground.

AIM was overconfident. There were no guards for a fair way into the tunnels.

And by the time Hawkeye got to the guard station, they weren't even a threat.

For once there wasn't a place where he could provide Overwatch from. So he was covering the rear of the group. It was an important job.

However, that still didn't stop him feeling slightly annoyed that he hadn't had a chance to get his own justice for Tony. Though he comforted himself with the knowledge that he would likely get many more chances.

There were a whole lot of AIM Goons who were probably in the base, after all.

So Hawkeye simply walked past the knocked out, gagged and handcuffed minions.

There was no noise as they moved through the corridors and down the stairs. Deeper and deeper inside the lair.

When they came to a split in the passageway, the NCIS Agents took one direction, while the Avengers took another. Though Hawkeye tagged on the end of the Agents.

It made sense. This way the two groups had a liaison between them.

Hawkeye remained covering the rear. His eyes constantly scanning for any threats. His bow ready to be drawn at the slightest motion.

The three Agents cleared each room quickly, professionally and silently. It was a clear display of their competence, something Hawkeye appreciated.

However, he didn't initially understand when Brodie(?) stopped in an empty room.

Well, it was empty of people. There was a rather lumpy looking mattress in a corner and a metal bedframe, which for some strange reason was standing on two legs only, meaning that the bed was upright.

"Pride, I think this is the room." She called out softly.

"I agree with her, King." LaSalle had gotten out his phone and was looking at something on it, "It matches. This is where they were holding Stark."

"You have photos?" Hawkeye snapped, "You didn't show us?"

"They were not relevant." Pride countered quickly, blocking Hawkeye's attempt to see LaSalle's phone, "Nobody needs to see the footage."

"Says who?" Hawkeye could feel his ire rising.

"Says me." Pride stepped forward, into Hawkeye's personal space, "No one needs to see them, because they aren't relevant. And I will do *anything* to keep Tony from having those pictures splashed all over the front of some tabloid. He doesn't deserve that. No-one does."

There was a story there, but Hawkeye wasn't in the mood to ask. And even if he was, they didn't have time to talk about it.

"This was where they were keeping him." Brodie(?) glanced around the room again, "Either they've managed to get him to make them what they want, in which case he's in some sort of lab…"

“Or they know we’re here and they’re moving him.” Pride nodded.

Both situations had their good points and their bad points.

“Hawkeye to all points,” Hawkeye whispered into the comms, “Stark is not in his cell. He has been moved. Look for an interrogation room or a lab.”

There was no response. But there didn’t need to be. All the Avengers knew what could be happening to Tony. Or what could have already happened.

But Hawkeye wasn’t going to think about that. He couldn’t.

He had to have confidence that Tony was worth more alive than dead.

They hadn’t got much further into the complex when Hawkeye felt the building shudder.

“Hawkeye!” The Captain’s voice came over the comm, “The Mandarin has Stark. Headed your way. He’s collapsing the tunnels. Move!”

Hawkeye immediately set himself to the back of the group again. He didn’t want anyone getting hurt or killed.

Part of his mind was frantically processing the information that the Mandarin was involved with AIM. It wasn’t something that SHIELD had known before. They had never known who ran AIM. They had never got high enough in the organisation before discovery to find that out.

SHIELD had always believed that the Mandarin ran the Ten Rings. And only that.

This drew a link between the Ten Rings and AIM.

It also made things more dangerous for Tony. After all the Ten Rings had held him captive in Afghanistan. No doubt they held a grudge towards him for his escape and the deaths of his captors.

But Hawkeye couldn't think about the consequences of that right then. He had to get out. And he had to get the NCIS Agents out.

He did, however, pause at the junction where the two groups had originally split, just in case he could see the Mandarin and Tony approaching. Or even the other Avengers.

All he could see was the tunnels collapsing.

He ran after the Agents, pushing them and himself as fast as he could go. There was no time to stop to try and retrieve any of the downed AIM minions. They would have to be dug out later, probably by Rescue Crews. Hawkeye did not envy whoever got *that* job.

He hoped that the other Avengers had found another route out. Though considering that they had Thor and War Machine it would be incredible if they hadn't. Those two could just punch through the soil to freedom.

He also hoped that they had managed to grab Tony. As he knew it would take several hours to find anyone in the collapsed systems. And with Tony's compromised lung capacity, he probably wouldn't last as long as a healthy person would.

When he emerged into the sunlight he was greeted by a sight that both pleased and displeased him.

It was Tony.

The situation was both good and bad.

He was standing under his own power – Good.

He was blindfolded – Bad.

He appeared relatively unharmed – Good.

His hands were chained to his waist – Bad.

Okay, there were other bad points as well. Such as the collar and leash around his neck. And the fact that the Mandarin could only just be seen standing behind him, pointing a gun at Tony's head.

But there was one overriding good point…

Tony was alive. And Tony was right there.

It didn't matter what nonsense was coming out of the Mandarin's mouth. What he said had no bearing on what was going to happen. He was not going anywhere with Tony. Hawkeye was going to get Tony back.

He carefully aimed his arrow.

But there was a problem. The Mandarin was too firmly hidden behind Tony. And while Hawkeye was confident of his ability to hit any target, no matter how small or how difficult the shot… He couldn't be sure that the Mandarin wouldn't react and kill Tony in the aftermath of the shot.

The shot would have to be perfect.

And he would have to move to get a perfect shot.

Hawkeye only had half an ear listening to the conversation going on in front of him, as the NCIS Agents attempted to negotiate.

He knew the negotiation would go nowhere. The Mandarin was not the type of person to stand down. And Hawkeye wasn't going to let Tony be taken away again.

Vaguely he was aware of Banner trying to stay out of everything. Desperately trying to stay calm and in control. The Hulk would not improve the situation.

With the two distractions, Hawkeye knew that as long as he kept his movements slow and fluid he would most likely not be noticed as he repositioned himself for the shot.

The human eye tracked movement, it was true. But the human brain would focus on the loudest thing first.

As long as Hawkeye was not the loudest and was not perceived at the largest threat… He would go unnoticed.

He was almost in position, mentally aiming his bow when it happened.

Tony cried out and both he and the Mandarin fell down.

Hawkeye charged forward, his heart pounding.

Tony couldn't be killed by the twitchy trigger finger of a NCIS Agent.

The Agents arrived at Tony's side at virtually the same time as Hawkeye. Hawkeye's attention was on the expanding blood stain that came from Tony's shoulder. Not for the first time Hawkeye wished that there were sleeves on his standard Hawkeye outfit. Then he'd

have something to tear off, to use as a bandage. He had a jacket when he was Agent Barton. He really needed to talk to the Supply Section.

He used his hands to try and stop the bleeding. His focus was reduced to the man beneath his hands. He simply trusted that the Mandarin would not be a problem.

Vaguely he was aware of something being moved out the way. Or was it someone?

Some fabric was shoved on top of his hands and he quickly used it as a pad.

He was doing all that he could, but he could sense that Tony was still losing blood.

"Welcome back, my little Prince." A gentle voice spoke in the panic of the moment.

The calmness and sheer affection in the tone broken through Hawkeye's laser focus; he looked up to see Agent Pride kneeling next to Tony's head. A hand was laid on Tony's cheek, softly stroking a thumb over the skin. Clearly an attempt to provoke some response from Tony.

"I'm not a Prince, King." Tony's voice was hoarse and slurred, but clear enough despite that.

"You will always be my Little Prince." Pride returned, calmly, "Now stay with me. Talk to me."

"How's Laurel?" Tony asked, "Last I heard she was at University?"

"Majoring in Music," Pride agreed, "She's got a boyfriend, Orion. Think this one might be the one."

"You feed him yet?"

"Of course I've fed him." Pride laughed, "It's what I do. I feed all my people. I even have bromances with them, according to Laurel."

"Want me to do a full check?"

“You think I haven’t already?” Pride smiled, “When you bringing that husband of yours to my city?”

“Didn’t think I was welcome.”

“Always.” Pride was firm, “Any day, any time. You know where I live, I presume?”

“Your office.” Tony went to shrug.

“Ah, ah…” Pride chided, “Don’t move. You’re injured. LaSalle?”

“Mandarin’s dead.” LaSalle replied, “Brodie?”

“Bus will be here in five.” Brodie put in, “Think you can hold on that long, Mister Stark?”

“Just watch me, sweetheart.” Tony had a bit more force behind the words this time, “I walked through the Afghanistan desert with significant chest trauma. I can do this. Walk in the park.”

“There’s my Little Prince.” Pride grinned, “Still got that fire, huh?”

“Some flames are hard to extinguish.” Tony pointed out.

“You haven’t been showing them much in the Press.” Pride countered.

“Been busy.” Tony retorted quickly, “When it’s all sorted then… Why do you care?”

“You are responsible forever for what you have tamed.” Pride seemingly quoted.

“Let me take a look.” Bruce put in as he finally joined the group.

“What kept you?” Hawkeye hissed.

“Had to calm the Other Guy down.” Bruce declared softly, “He is *not* happy about Tony being hurt.”

“So you tamed me?” Tony outwardly ignored Bruce and Hawkeye.

“Well, there was a lot of watching each other out the corner of our eyes.” Pride seemingly reminded.

“But also a great deal of talking.” Tony was apparently arguing, “Lots of words.”

“Well, you’re no fox.” Pride grinned, “I find words work better with children.”

“Hey, Brucie-Bear!” Tony addressed Bruce, “Meet Dwayne Pride. King to his friends. The King of New Orleans.”

“Hold still.” Bruce gently pushed the arm that had come up to pat him down again, “You’ve got a through and through.”

“A through and through and through.” LaSalle put in, “In him, out him and into the other guy. One hell of a shot.”

Part of Hawkeye agreed, but the main part of him was furious that someone had *shot* Tony. Even if it was only to hit the Mandarin.

Vaguely behind him, Hawkeye heard footsteps. But he didn’t turn around. He knew the fall of those steps, both sets.

“How is he?” The Captain murmured to Hawkeye, Steve dangerously close to emerging from behind the mask and shield.

“Point Break!” Tony greeted Thor enthusiastically, “Bit late to the party, buddy. You missed out on some smitting.”

“Verily Tony,” Thor smiled gently, “I am grieved to have missed such. You are well, little Scholar?”

“I’m not sure if that’s an insult,” Tony frowned, “I’ll be alright. Thor, this is Dwayne Pride. King to his friends. The King of New Orleans.”

“A mighty name.” Thor declared, “And did he earn this name with a mighty deed?”

“Indeed he did.” Tony replied immediately, “And he’s a great cook. Part of the heart and soul of New Orleans. We should visit sometime. The food is great and the music amazing! Or is it the music that’s great and the food’s that amazing?”

“Well, the night is always young,” LaSalle put in, “Even when it’s morning. And your chariot awaits, my Prince.”

“Only King can call me that.” Tony instantly reprimanded, “He knows why. And where am I going?”

“Hospital.” King stated, even as the ambulance crew started to sort Tony out for transport.

“Do I have to?” Tony wined.

“Yes.” The word was chorused by everyone.

Hawkeye watched as Tony was carried into the ambulance. Pride was only moments behind, easily managing to climb in with the crew.

Captain America went to follow, but Hawkeye caught his arm. While the Archer was in no way shape or form able to exert enough force to physically stop the Super-Soldier, the pressure was enough to catch his attention.

"You can't." Hawkeye murmured, "There's only space for one. And we don't have the right."

"He's my *husband*!" Captain America snapped.

"No," The Black Widow put in, "He's Steve's husband. But you're Captain America. We'll take the cars and get to the hospital that way."

"Tony will be fine." Bruce added as they made their way over to the cars, at a fast pace, "The bullet missed all the major blood vessels and all the nerves as well."

"You're sure?" Hawkeye didn't miss the way the Captain's voice wavered on the two words.

"If it had hit a major blood vessel," Bruce declared as Hawkeye started to drive, "He'd be dead already. And if it'd hit a major nerve cluster he wouldn't have been trying to move it so much. It was an expert shot."

"Only to be expected." The Black Widow sniffed, "Hawkeye would do nothing less. Even with a gun."

"It wasn't my bullet." Hawkeye shook his head, "Wasn't my shot. I was moving into position. Trying to get a clean shot that wouldn't hit Tony. That wasn't mine. I didn't hear it. The angle was wrong for anyone else close. That was a sniper's shot."

Hawkeye could feel the tension in the room rise. He knew it was a good thing that Thor was travelling by Hammer and that both the Falcon and War Machine were flying to the hospital. Otherwise it would have been unbearable.

Also Thor would have probably lost his temper.

After all the fact that the NCIS Agents had brought along a sniper and not told them was completely infuriating. It was essential mission orientated information.

As it was, Spiderman had climbed on top of the vehicle in an attempt to avoid the tension in the air.

When they arrived at the hospital they were ushered through to the Surgical Waiting Room. But Pride wasn't there.

Hawkeye twitched to enter the ventilation ducts and watch over Tony's operation, which they were told had begun almost the moment he had arrived at the hospital. However he knew that the Surgical Rooms were on a separate system to prevent contamination and he would not fit into those vents.

Also going into the observation area was not a possibility as the NOPD had shut down all entry and exit from anywhere which could harm Tony. Clearly at the orders of NCIS. And they wouldn't even allow the Avengers through.

War Machine had managed to help the situation by hacking into the security cameras of the Surgical Suite. So he was being kept updated by through his HUD. He couldn't show what he saw to anyone else, without making the doctors suspicious. Though he did keep the other Avengers informed.

Spiderman had slipped outside, remaining on coms. His explanation that he didn't feel that everything was right was sufficient for most members of the team.

"Hey," Hawkeye bumped the Captain's shoulder gently with his own, "Tones'll be alright. You heard what Bruce said. Besides he always bounces back. Remember the black eye he had last month?"

"Playing catch with Butterfingers." The Captain murmured.

"And the electrical burns before that?" Hawkeye reminded.

"Dummy was trying to help him wire something." The Captain nodded slightly.

"And the dislocated shoulder?"

"Caught himself while working on one of his cars."

"Remember when he burnt his eyebrows off?"

“He walked in covered in fire-suppressant foam from an over-enthusiastic Dummy.” The Captain found it hard to be unamused by his memory.

“That’s nothing,” War Machine grinned, “You should have seen him at MIT. There was this one time he walked straight into an exam, left wrist in a cast, split lip, bandage around his ankle. He’d missed nearly two weeks of school. Still sat down and set the curve for the exam. Never did find out where he’d been partying for that time. He never talked about it.”

“Never?” The Black Widow frowned slightly.

“No.” War Machine shook his head.

“Anything else strange happen around then?” The Falcon asked.

“Well,” War Machine cocked his head to one side, “He changed his Thesis Project. It was originally an AI. He’d gotten a real way into the coding too. Jarvis wasn’t anything like what you know now. But he could answer the phone, keep a schedule and remind Tony about classes and messages. Tony had just programed him to be able to turn the coffee machine on. He changed it to some weapon thing. I can’t even remember what it was. I know Stane was enthusiastic about it. Tony kept working on Jarvis, but it was a personal project, not his Thesis.”

“You ever consider,” The Falcon muttered, “That he wasn’t partying? That he was kidnapped? That Stane got him out and that Thesis Project was payment?”

“He never said.” War Machine breathed, “Tony never said anything like that. He… He would have said.”

“Would he?” The Falcon raised an eyebrow, “Don’t get me wrong, I never met him before he wandered into the Centre, but… What I remember from the tabloids is that he never had very many people he could rely on. He wasn’t the sort of guy who would go to someone else to solve his problem. He’s changed since then. He came to the Centre seeking help. Even if he couldn’t bring himself to actually ask for it. He’s a complex man. Whole books could be written about his psychology… Only most people have already made up their minds about him when they first meet him.”

They sat in silence for a while, contemplating the Falcon’s insight. Despite not having a formal psychology degree, he was quite good at analysing and helping people psychologically.

“They’re done.” War Machine declared, “No panicking. Everyone relaxed. It went well. He’s being moved out the Theatre… Surgeon enroute.”

Virtually as one, they rose to their feet to greet the surgeon, who was more than slightly taken aback by the massed ranks of the Avengers. Probably not so much the numbers, after all they only numbered seven, but more their size.

They weren't exactly small: Thor, the Captain and War Machine in his suit.

The Falcon with his wings, even folded away, looked intimidating with all the straps and guns.

Much like the Black Widow, though her intimidation was more due to her aura. She always seemed to be five times bigger than she was, unless she didn't want to.

Hawkeye knew that with his bow and arrow he was often dismissed as a threat. But with the current situation he was almost radiating danger.

The only "safe" member of the group was Doctor Banner. And he wasn't exactly safe.

So the Doctor had a good reason to be afraid.

"Family of Tony Stark?" The Doctor asked nervously.

Together they stepped forward. Thus causing the Surgeon to take a step backwards.

"Family." He repeated.

"I'm his brother." Colonel Rhodes stated.

The look up and down that the Surgeon gave him was clearly disbelieving.

"It's okay, Doctor," Pride stepped into the room gently, "They're good people. You can tell them."

The Surgeon relaxed.

"The wound was easy enough to stitch up." The Surgeon reported, "A clean path. No damage to major blood vessels or any nerve clusters. Probably the cleanest bullet wound I've ever had to treat. If it was accidental, I'll eat my diploma. The area in a shoulder where a bullet will *not* hit anything is an inch wide at *most*, more likely half an inch in Stark. Gentlemen and Lady, you have a very skilled sniper on your team. Three or four months and you won't even know he was shot. But he could be using it sooner, to a limited degree. Some of the other injuries he was given were actually more concerning, but all of them will heal cleanly. I can say with certainty that this time next year he will be at one hundred percent, if he doesn't get himself into more trouble. Most likely sooner."

Hawkeye relaxed slightly. It was good news.

"Thank you, Doctor." The Captain smiled warmly, "When can we see him?"

"Usually I wouldn't allow it for a few hours," The Surgeon replied, "However, given the circumstances, he'll be settled in his room in ten minutes. You can see him then. Please remember, that a lot of the monitors and machines he is hooked up to are purely precautionary in nature. It is not as bad as it looks."

"When can he travel?" Colonel Rhodes asked.

"I wouldn't recommend he move for at least a week," The Surgeon stated, "Preferably two."

"Thank you." The Captain nodded.

Hawkeye knew they were going to ignore that. Once they had assessed the situation themselves. After all there was a huge difference between "Doctor's Recommendations" and "Will kill you".

The Surgeon scurried away, clearly relieved to be leaving the situation.

"You had your *sniper* posted?" The Black Widow prowled forward, like some deadly cat, "And you never told us. You never *warned* us."

"My sniper?" Pride blinked, "I don't have a sniper."

"Of course you do." Hawkeye snapped, "That shot didn't come from nowhere. You set one of your office up for that shot. They took a huge risk. That shot could have *killed* Stark!"

"Just how many of us do you think are in the New Orleans Office?" LaSalle asked, coming up behind Pride, with Brodie.

"Certainly more than *three*!" Colonel Rhodes snapped, "You handle cases from the Mississippi River to the Texas Panhandle."

"There used to be only two of us." LaSalle shrugged, "Until Brodie joined us from the Greater Lakes office."

"What?" All of the Avengers jolted.

"We're a small office." Pride repeated the fact, "We just cover a large area. Doctor Loretta Wade of the Jefferson Parish Medical Office does our autopsies for us. Our forensics are run by her assistant Sebastian Lund. Neither of whom would be able to fire a sniper rifle with that degree of accuracy and nor would they even try."

"And our computer evidence is run by Patton Plame." LaSalle agreed.

"Could he…" The Captain began.

"He's in a wheelchair." Brodie cut the question off, "He couldn't have gotten to the location, even if he could fire a rifle like that. I certainly wouldn't want to try to make that shot."

"Nor would I." Pride nodded, "I only know of two Agents in NCIS I would trust to make that shot. One is Special Agent Blythe of the LA Special Operations Project. She couldn't get here in time. We moved too quickly. The other is my brother, Special Agent Gibbs of the DC Office. He couldn't get here in time either. Not that I tried to call either of them. We also didn't contact any of the other Alphabet Agencies nor the NOPD. We thought the shot was from one of your people."

"What you see is what you get." Hawkeye declared, "We don't have anyone else."

"Hawkeye's our sniper." The Captain stated, "And he prefers his bow."

"Then who made that shot?" LaSalle asked.

Running feet caught the group's attention, all of them turned to face the door, several weapons being drawn, almost automatically.

A skinny, tall man rounded the corner clearly moving towards the group. A tablet was in his hand.

"King," The man skidded to a stop in front of the Agent, "You aren't going to believe this. I mean, this is incredible. I couldn't believe it. But all the evidence so far backs it up…"

"Sebastian," Pride caught the man's shoulders, "What did you find out?"

"I matched the bullet." Sebastian (Lund?) declared, "It's not exactly a common make. The supply of .338 Stark Lapua Variation bullets has dropped to seriously low levels since they stopped production. Naturally so, I suppose. Still it's a shame. They have a much higher degree of accuracy even if they aren't used with the corresponding Stark gun range, which this one wasn't. The stria match. I never thought I'd get that result on my system *ever*!"

"Who?" LaSalle seemed to have a better grip on the torrent of words flowing from Sebastian's mouth than Hawkeye or any of the other Avengers did.

Ice water flooded Hawkeye's veins as he heard the three words that Sebastian blurted out.

"The Winter Soldier."

Chapter 39: Chapter 38

Hawkeye couldn't move. He couldn't think. Every thought process in his body just failed.

He felt, really, more than heard the torrent of words that still flowed from Sebastian's mouth.

"The Winter Soldier, King! The man is a legend. A *ghost*! Most of the intelligence community didn't believe he existed until recently. When he started working alongside Iron Man. Some people still believe that he isn't the Winter Soldier, but merely abusing the legend for his own purposes. Personally I believe he *is* the Winter Soldier emerging into the light for the first time.

"There's a group of us, online, who have managed to identify what we believe are the Winter Soldier's assassinations. From the first few assassinations when he used a M1941 Johnson Rifle, right up to the modern day. We've used witness descriptions and photographs and matching the stria of bullets. We've dug through every old file. We've come to some astounding conclusions… It's all a conspiracy.

"It's a cover-up. You look at the assassinations that the Winter Soldier has carried out… Nine times out of ten he manages to kill the right person at the right time to turn Unrest into all-out War. Whether that is between two or more countries or within one country. And those Wars? They can't be resolved by the people involved. An outside force *always* has to intervene to resolve it. Usually us, as in America. Usually with troops on the ground. More recently it has been the shadowy organisation SHIELD.

"There's a theory on the net, that the Winter Soldier is part of an elaborate False Flag operation. Hence the Soviet Star on his shoulder. Clearly marking him as one of the bad guys. Yet every time he works politically his actions nearly always result in America or SHIELD having a greater say in certain areas. Now, who it is going to all that trouble to cause that… No-one's quite sure. But the finger is being pointed very firmly at the upper ranks of the government and the top ranks of SHIELD. Particularly SHIELD as they answer to no named group. I mean seriously, no-one can find out who keeps SHIELD in check. They're running around doing who knows what and have no checks or balances that anyone knows about.

“It makes sense, really. After all, why would you so clearly mark your assassin as part of your country? It completely defeats the purpose of having an assassin. Professional assassins are meant to not leave evidence to link back to their employer. But a Soviet Star? That’s an *obvious* connection. Too obvious. Particularly that every time he’s been seen… He hasn’t covered that arm. Even on the covert ops. Not *once* has he covered that arm. He wears the mask. He shows the arm. Hides his face. Displays the Star. Anyone else think that’s really weird? I mean how hard must it be to find one man with a metal arm? It’s not like he can really live a normal life. Someone would know.”

“Thank you, Sebastian.” Pride cut through the stream of words, “Have you managed to identify the dead man yet?”

“He’s the Mandarin.” Sebastian shrugged, then paused, “And you want to know who that is. I’ll find out.”

And he was gone.

Hawkeye’s shock and horror at finding out that the Winter Soldier was in the area had convalesced into a burning need to make sure that Tony was secure. That he was safe. They had no way of telling what the Winter Soldier wanted. He could have wanted Tony for himself… Or for Iron Man.

After all, considering what Iron Man had done for Tony in the past, without the genius’ knowledge, it wouldn’t be all that farfetched to assume that the villain had ulterior motives in regard to Tony. Like a stalkery thing. Personally the cause of more than one of Hawkeye’s nightmares.

Though considering that Iron Man had never made one visible step towards carrying out any nefarious plans towards Tony, nor any attempt towards establishing communication; most of Hawkeye’s fears in that regard had remained completely unfounded and without “basis in fact”. As he was told the last time he tried to report them to Sitwell.

Hawkeye managed to get his feet to work, moving ungracefully (for him) forward as he left the Waiting Room. The Surgeon had left his clipboard behind, helpfully identifying which room Tony had been taken to.

Probably technically a breach in security, but one Hawkeye was more than willing to ignore at that precise moment.

Later, Hawkeye couldn't remember anything between the Waiting Room and single room that contained Tony.

He spent the next ten or so minutes checking that the room was as secure and safe as he could make it.

When he finally became aware of anyone else in the room, at the end of his checks, it was to discover that all the Avengers were crammed into the small space. Spiderman had actually given up trying to stay on the ground with them and was stuck up in the corner of the room. Doctor Banner was flipping through the medical chart. The Black Widow was running through her own security checks. War Machine and Captain America had settled into chairs on either side of Tony. The Falcon had one hand on the Colonel's shoulder, clearly trying to support him emotionally. Thor had taken up a position near Tony's head, on the Captain's side, his hammer ready for any possible attack.

"Kid," Hawkeye breathed out, "How you feeling?"

"Physically fine." Spiderman shrugged, "Spidey-Sense-Wise? Like someone's watching me."

"Can you tell the difference between different people watching you?" Hawkeye pressed.

"Never tried." Spiderman frowned, "Is there something I need to know?"

"The Winter Soldier was the sniper." The Black Widow stated calmly.

"Okay," Spiderman gulped, "Good thing? Bad thing? We-don't-know thing?"

"We don't know." The Falcon stated, "Until we know why, we don't know anything."

"If it helps at all," Spiderman offered, "When I've seen him around New York, he's never shown violence in my direction."

"You've seen him around and not engaged him?" War Machine demanded.

"He's never actually committing a crime when I see him." Spiderman shrugged, "And… My Spidey-Sense goes off. Tells me not to go near him. Warns me of danger."

"And you don't do anything?" The Captain was appalled.

“I follow him.” Spiderman defended himself, “Still don’t see him doing anything illegal. I know he knows I’m watching him. But he never acts against me.”

“You should report it.” The Captain snapped.

“To who?” Spiderman asked, “I’m not part of SHIELD. And the cops can’t deal with him. And last time I tried, you were all busy. Besides… I know he’s got this reputation as some great assassin… But I’ve never seen that. And I haven’t seen any proof.”

“How many times have you seen him?” The Black Widow demanded.

“Three times.” Spiderman replied quickly, “Once I lost him when he entered a building. Turns out that particular building had a sub-basement that had an access panel to the subway. Only a few hundred yards from Roosevelt Avenue Station. So no idea where he went after that. The second time, I was with the X-Men. So I know his surface emotions at that moment.”

“Professor Xavier does not pry.” Hawkeye frowned, “So Tony says.”

“Oh, he doesn’t.” Spiderman shook his head, “Not unless you’re a threat. Jean, on the other hand, has slightly more flexible morals. Plus, from what I’ve managed to piece together, while Professor X has to concentrate to get into someone’s head… Jean has to concentrate to stay *out*. And she’s curious. Not curious enough to let go of her morals. But curious enough to do a surface scan of emotions.”

“What did she get?” The Falcon pressed.

“Nostalgia.” Spiderman started to list, “Guilt. Grief. Amusement. But that was linked to an old memory.”

“Sounds like he was reminiscing.” The Falcon nodded, “Possibly about good memories, which were linked to bad ones. Ones he regrets. Possibly even memories about how he got started.”

“Started?” Bruce looked up from the files.

“He had to have a start.” The Falcon reminded, “Very few people just become cold-blooded killers. There’s usually a trigger.”

“What about the third time?” Hawkeye asked.

“It was in Brooklyn.” Spiderman declared, “He went into this old shop. It was long abandoned. I waited for him to come out. After half an hour of waiting I went in. There was a passageway, I found. Following his dust-prints. It led to this big empty warehouse. I mean seriously all there was in the room were some balconies and busted out window-frames of an old office. I poked around for a bit. But the place had been deserted for years. All I found was an old cartridge casing. German, I think. From about the 1940s. I kept it.”

“But he wasn’t there?” The Captain queried.

“No.” Spiderman shook his head, “There was this back exit. He was long gone. But I reckon he was there for a while before he left. It wasn’t just a trick to get me off his trail.”

“Any idea why?” The Falcon asked.

“It was just a warehouse.” Spiderman shrugged, “Nothing special about it. Except for the fact that it’s prime Brooklyn real-estate and no-one’s using it.”

“Some people keep things and don’t do anything with them, just because, Spidey.” LaSalle spoke from the doorway.

The NCIS team had turned up. Brodie easily lifting the medical file from Bruce.

Hawkeye felt he should object to strangers reading Tony’s medical file. But he couldn’t find it in him to actually say anything.

He’d been hit with too many shocks in too short a period of time. He could tell the symptoms. He also had been awake for too long. And while he could normally function for longer without sleep, he’d not had a full night’s sleep since Tony went missing. So he wasn’t exactly on top form.

“Err, Pride?” Brodie spoke up, “You might want to have a word with someone. He’s got a lot of old injuries.”

“He was a captive of the Ten Rings, before all of this.” Colonel Rhodes protested.

“These are more recent.” Brodie countered, “I’d say more indicative of domestic abuse.”

“Take that back!” The Captain almost snarled.

“If I had a single *inkling* that Tony was being abused like that,” Colonel Rhodes’ voice was dripping frozen venom as he spoke, “I would take him away from the situation. No matter *what* it cost me. Tony is my little brother. That is a duty I take *very* seriously, Agent Brodie. That means Tony is mine to protect. Tony is mine to cherish. Tony is mine to take care of. Others may help. But I am the longest standing constant in Tony’s life. I am the oldest friend he has. I saw him through MIT, through losing his parents and through his recovery from Afghanistan. He has *always* been more to me than an asset for the Government to use and abuse. I may wear the armour… But it is *his* armour. I may wear Air-Force Blues… But it is in Tony’s name that I put them on. Do *not* talk to me about abuse.”

“A lot of his injuries are consistent with such events.” Bruce put in, “However knowledge of the individual involved can change a great deal. Tony is an inventor. He likes to make things with his own hands. He also has several, rather clumsy, helper-bots. They are perfectly careful around everyone else. But they seem to forget that he isn’t made of metal and circuit boards like themselves.”

“The Little Prince would forget to program himself as a squishy human to them.” Pride smiled.

“Why dost thou call Stark the Little Prince?” Thor asked.

Hawkeye was ninety percent sure that Thor sometimes deliberately hammed up his “Old-World” speech, just to watch people start. And to make people underestimate him.

“My wife was pregnant with our daughter,” Pride replied slowly, “I went to buy a book I remembered enjoying as a child. I wanted to be able to read it to her as she grew up. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or if you want to look at it another way, the right place at the right time. Tony was there. He got kidnapped. I got swept up as well. He didn’t trust me at first. Thought I was one of them pretending to be his friend. I ended up reading him the story. He reminded me of the main character, the Little Prince. He didn’t understand adults. Thought them narrow-minded and foolish. Because that was all he had experienced. He didn’t understand love or friendship or taming or any one of dozens of things that little children should know. I knew who he was. But he never gave me his name. So I started calling him the Little Prince. By the time that we got out of there, I’d gotten into the habit of calling him that. Just like he calls me King.”

“What happened after that?” The Falcon pressed.

“I gave him the book and we parted ways.” Pride shrugged, “About a month later he sent me a first edition copy of the book, in the original French. And a mobile for Lauren’s crib. It has each of the characters from the book, painstakingly recreated complete with tiny motions. It’s a work of art. And perfect. Lauren loved it.”

“You’ve seen him between then and now.” Colonel Rhodes accused.

“When NCIS found out about our previous interaction,” Pride stated, “They send me to try and negotiate for a security system. To be quite frank I wasn’t the best person to send. I barely understood what they wanted.”

“But they sent you anyway.” Rhodes sighed, “Yep. Been there. Done that. I managed to get myself up to speed on what they wanted. So I became the designated liaison.”

“I couldn’t.” Pride laughed, “So I got reassigned back to here. Though part of that may have been my expense report.”

“Too many lap-dancing clubs and too much alcohol?” The Black Widow half-accused.

“No,” Pride shook his head, “They were expecting that. It was the fact that I *didn’t*. And my expense report consisted almost solely of ingredients, which I used to *feed* the Little Prince. I feed my people. It’s what I do. And quite honestly, he needed it.”

“What day was he on?” Rhodes sighed.

“Three.” Pride replied easily understanding the question, “And Brodie?… It’s not abuse. I saw him give himself a concussion while working.”

“He’s a businessman, Pride.” Brodie argued, “That doesn’t explain these injuries.”

“He’s an inventor.” Pride countered.

“He’s an engineer.” Rhodes added, “He designs his own stuff. There’s a *reason* I had a full, expanded First Aid kit in my room while at MIT. I needed it to bandage his injuries. One time I watched him catch his leg on a piece of metal, look at the blood, shrug and pull off his t-shirt to bandage it with. And the *only* reason he bandaged it, was because he didn’t wasn’t to get the blood on his project. The man has a ridiculously high pain tolerance. He’ll shrug off most injuries, only treating them if he feels it will get in the way of his inventing.”

“Or if someone else nags him into it.” Bruce put in.

“Can’t you get him to be more sensible?” Brodie challenged.

“No,” Rhodes shook his head, “Stark men are made of Iron. They don’t care if they get hurt on the way to a new creation. It’s the way he is. You might as well ask the sun not to rise.”

“The sea.” Pride laughed, “It is about as willing to obey the constraints you try to put upon it.”

“Amen.” Rhodes sighed.

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It took nearly twelve hours before Tony opened his eyes. Though Hawkeye thought part of that was less due to the sedative in his system and more to do with the large bags under Tony’s eyes. Clearly sleep deprivation had been used at one point to try and break the genius. And he hadn’t been able to catch up.

The NCIS team had mainly dispersed. Pride flitted in and out, fetching coffee and food for them at regular intervals.

"Hey Tones," Rhodes greeted Tony, "Welcome back. Don't try to talk. Let me get you some ice."

It had been decided that it was better if the Avengers that Tony knew about were the only ones to talk to him. It would help the genius not figure out their identities. It hadn't been an easy agreement, but Captain America had eventually given in.

Besides the Captain could see and hear everything. And they'd be taking Tony home before long.

After a few ice chips, Tony turned his head to look around the room.

"Wow," He murmured, his voice hoarse, "You really rolled out the red carpet for me, Platypus. What happened?"

"What do you remember?" Rhodes asked in return.

"Hawaii," Tony started off, "Are Happy and Agent alright? You found them right?"

"We found Happy." Rhodes agreed, "Who's Agent?"

"Agent." Tony repeated, "Agent Coulson."

"We found Phil." Rhodes nodded, "We found them all. They're okay."

"Who's Phil?" Tony blinked, "Coulson's first name is Agent."

Hawkeye had to smoother a snort at that comment. Tony's face was radiating confused innocence to anyone who didn't know him. But Hawkeye could see the mischief sparkling in the genius' eyes.

It was good to see that Tony's fire and attitude hadn't been stomped out of him.

“We found them and they’re safe.” Rhodes smiled.

“After that…” Tony frowned, “They drugged me. Next thing I know, I was in a cell. They wanted me to work for them. I refused. Is Steve safe?”

“You think I’d leave him unprotected?” Rhodes cocked an eyebrow.

“No,” Tony relaxed slightly, “You wouldn’t. What about Pepper and the rest of the Tower?”

“All safe.” Rhodes reassured, “I wouldn’t let any harm come to them… Or you. *If* you remember to stay in the Hum-drum-vee.”

“But the Fun-vee’s so much fun!” Tony mock whined, “I managed to snag a phone. Got a message out. Then the Mandarin dragged me and there was a stand-off. King was there. I’m in Louisiana. Or I was. I got shot. Who shot me? I don’t think it was Legolas. It wasn’t an arrow. It certainly wasn’t the Captain. He doesn’t use a gun these days. Only a shield. Can’t have been Green Bean. He can’t use a gun. And Brucie-bear wouldn’t. It’s not Spidey’s style. Point Break’s hammer isn’t exactly a precision weapon, so I’d be hurting a lot more if that had been used. And electricity doesn’t give this kind of pain. So that just leaves Blackie, Flying Birdie and you, Honey-bear. Which one of you shot me? Did I *really* upset you that much? If it’d been King and his people, I would have heard the tone of the negotiation change.”

Hawkeye had to agree that Tony’s logic was sound. He simply didn’t have all the information. And the nicknames were quite funny. It seemed that Tony was almost trying to claim them as his own. In his own crazy way of his.

Strangely the nickname for himself sounded almost familiar. But he’d never directly interacted with Tony as Hawkeye, so it had to be his imagination.

“It was the Winter Soldier.” Rhodes stated after a long pause.

“The Winter Soldier?” Tony’s voice went small and meek. Completely unlike what Hawkeye was used to hearing from Tony when he was in the company of those he cared for.

Or even around those who didn’t know him. Where he had to put on the ‘Stark Mask’.

In fact it sounded remarkably similar to when Tony had found out what Stane had done.

But it couldn't be. It had been betrayal that had coated Tony's speech then. And in order to feel betrayed by someone you had to trust them.

And Tony wouldn't trust the Winter Soldier. He was a ruthless, cold-blooded, merciless assassin.

To trust someone you had to know them. Or at least believe that they wouldn't harm you.

And Tony wasn't fool enough to trust someone like that. Not after he was burned so badly with Stane. It had taken a while for Tony to be comfortable with Jane and Darcy coming and going so freely in his home. And Hawkeye didn't know anyone less likely to hurt the Genius than those two.

Jane because Tony got her science and willingly aided and abetted her with anything she needed.

Darcy because she loved Tony's snark factor too much to harm him. And Tony had improved her taser without being asked.

"Why?" Tony carried on, "Why would he…? Why?"

"The bullet went through you and killed the Mandarin." Rhodes reported gently.

"I want to go home." Tony declared, "I want to go home. When can I go home?"

Somehow Tony was looking awfully small in the hospital bed. Much smaller than he was.

Hawkeye could feel the unintentional tugs on his heartstrings. He wanted to wrap Tony up in a hug and tell him everything was going to be alright. That Clint would keep him safe.

And if he felt like that, God only knew what was going through the *Captain's* mind.

Chapter 40: Chapter 39

It took three days before Tony managed to sign himself out AMA. The Avengers escorted him back to the Tower and the Genius retreated into his and Steve's bedroom; curled up in their bed and looked like he was pretending that the rest of the world didn't exist.

Clint watched from the air-vents as Steve crept in only moments later. Climbing into the bed and curling around Tony, his protection and shield against the rest of the world.

Clint silently ghosted through the vents until he emerged in his own bedroom on his own floor. He slid into the bed and moved to the side of the man he loved the most in the World.

"Hey," Clint murmured, "Is there time for us now?"

"Yes." Phil returned, shifting toward Clint's warmth.

But things couldn't be all pleasure. Eventually they had spent enough time reaffirming that each other were still mostly alright.

"Do you know anything I don't?" Barton barely vocalized the question.

"There was one attempt to grab Pepper." Coulson replied, "Easily foiled. She doesn't even know. The Mandarin has been identified as Trevor Slattery, a British actor. Fingerprints matched up to an old drug conviction."

"No." Barton shook his head, "Impossible. Can't be."

"That's who was killed." Coulson stated, "And he has identified himself as the Mandarin in many videos. No one would be foolish enough to impersonate him. Stark could offer a valuable insight into the Mandarin's organisational structure. No-one has gotten out alive before now."

"Tomorrow." Clint was firm, "Let him have one night free, before you interrogate him."

"Question."

“I’ve seen your questioning.” Clint snorted, “And your interrogating. There’s not a lot of difference.”

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There really wasn’t. Not that Coulson used a heavy hand when interrogating. It was gentle and subtle…

And incredibly persistent.

Tony was clearly getting frustrated as Coulson went around and around going over the same topics again and again. It had already been over two hours. Not that Tony had really given Coulson anything new. Just that Tony had been told to work on a computer program. There were mentions of torture, but Tony was keeping the details of that pretty close to his chest. He was clearly uncomfortable talking about it.

Not that Clint was really surprised. Tony still didn’t talk about Afghanistan. So why would he talk about New Orleans?

Clint hoped that it wouldn’t be thought of like that in Tony’s mind.

“No,” Tony shook his head, “He was taking orders from someone.”

“The Mandarin gives orders.” Coulson replied, “He doesn’t take them.”

“No,” Tony closed his eyes, “Yes, he gave a lot of orders. But I also heard him get them… I knew the voice too.”

“Who was it?” Coulson pressed.

“I don’t know.” Tony fired back, “I was blindfolded and drugged at the time. I get the feeling that I was being shown off. Confirmed that I was really there. That I was under control.”

Clint's eyes narrowed as he saw Tony try to supress a shudder. He knew what that sort of shudder meant. And he didn't like it. The Mandarin hadn't deserved such an easy death if he had caused such a shudder.

"But…" Tony frowned.

He turned away from Coulson, picking up a tablet. He placed it on a table, propped up. Using both hands he flicked them across the screen causing images to hang in the air. Clint marvelled at the technology.

He knew he shouldn't really be so amazed, not after all the time he had spent in Tony's presence and in Tony's home. But every so often Tony would whip out something he'd never seen before. Yet he always acted as if it were something old. As if it were normal for him.

Sometimes it made Clint wonder just how many pieces of technology Tony had that he kept to himself, simply because he had developed it for his own benefit.

"Jarvis," Tony was seemingly ignoring Coulson, "List all the science events I have attended."

"Of course, Sir." New images of different symbols appeared.

It didn't take much for Clint to realize these were the different logos for the conferences and seminars.

"Segregate the ones after Howard died." Tony instructed.

"Yes, Sir."

Tony motioned to bin the logos that Jarvis segregated. Clint was surprised at the large number that it was. It was quite impressive that Tony had been to so many at such a young age. Though the number that was left was huge.

“Cut those that happened after… Afghanistan.” Tony’s pause before the word was small, but clearly audible. He wasn’t comfortable thinking about the place.

“Yes, Sir.”

It didn’t reduce the images by many. But then Clint wasn’t exactly surprised. Tony hadn’t been to many conferences after his experience in Afghanistan.

“Reduce to those where I was scheduled to speak at.” Tony ordered.

Again the list shrank.

“Reduce to those where I got spectacularly drunk at.” Tony added.

The list didn’t shrink by much this time.

“I got drunk a lot.” Tony blinked.

“Indeed Sir.” Jarvis agreed neutrally.

“Reduce to those where I *still* made my talk.”

Again the list didn’t reduce by much.

“Functional alcoholic.” Tony shrugged, “Guess I should have expected that… Stane wasn’t there… Remove those where Stane was also present.”

“How could you remember something like that,” Coulson asked, “Yet not remember the name of the person?”

Tony ignored Coulson’s question, he just looked at the greatly diminished number of logos.

Clint was surprised; the number had dropped to below double figures. Clearly Stane had been keeping Tony under his thumb for a very long time, with extremely close supervision.

"Reduce to the ones where I was overseas." Tony carried on, "I remember the hotel menu being in multiple languages."

Only three were left.

"Start with Bern in '99." Tony declared, "Bring up all photos you can find from that conference."

A collection of photos came up. Tony quickly flicked them out to hover in the air all around him.

He stayed in the centre and spun the photos around himself.

Clint watched as Tony stopped. He enlarged a photo. It featured only one person. A bespectacled man, of Middle Eastern descent, by Clint's reckoning. Clearly older than Tony and well presented. He seemed to be watching everything going on around him.

"Jarvis," Tony smiled wanly at the photo, "Save this photo on my private server."

"Any particular file name, Sir?"

"Salvation." Tony replied, "Cross referenced with Asklepios."

The words were whispered reverently and something else that Clint couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Is this the man who you heard?" Coulson interrupted Tony's moment of reverie.

"No." Tony shook his head firmly, "He's not involved at all."

With that Tony turned back to the collection of photos. He moved through them steadily.

Pausing once again, he enlarged a photo. Clint noticed it was of a younger Tony and a woman, he vaguely recognised. It took a moment for him to place her.

"Jarvis," Tony frowned, "Focus on the cards in Maya's hand. Enhance and enlarge."

The cards were made the focus of the photograph, but upon enlargement the details of the business cards were illegible.

"Jarvis?" Tony cocked his head slightly to one side, "I wish to read the card."

"My apologies, Sir," Jarvis replied, "I am limited by the pixilation of the original scan of this image. Even with rendering I cannot improve the text to be legible."

"Composite," Tony instructed, "Use images of this card from all photos."

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis acknowledged.

Coulson tried several more times to get Tony's attention, but the Genius simply ignored all attempts. He was focused on the compilation of images that Jarvis was creating.

After a few minutes an image became clear on the screen.

"AIM." Tony read out.

Only those letters were visible. The rest of the card's text was blurred.

"I apologise Sir," Jarvis spoke up, "I cannot render the text into anything more legible, without creatively constructing the text."

"You did what you could." Tony dismissed the apology.

"However I was able to discover another image of this text." Jarvis continued.

A second image appeared. Clint blinked as he took in the proud wearer of a t-shirt with AIM printed across it. The face was sort of familiar, but Clint couldn't place the owner.

Though you'd have thought he'd remember teeth and hair like that.

"Any other records of his association, Jarvis?" Tony frowned slightly.

"None in text files that I can access, Sir," Jarvis replied, "However I have managed to find a few photocopied documents that identify him as the founder. It appears AIM was the original name of Killian Advanced Ideas, a think-tank. Which later became Killian Advanced Industries, when it developed into a business. These facts are highly covered up; as far as official online records go the original name *was* KAI. Mister Killian seems to have done a very thorough job of covering his tracks."

"But not good enough." Tony nodded.

Killian? Clint cocked his head inside the air-vent. He must be a relation to Aldrich Killian, Clint thought, which would explain the jarring similarity in facial structure, but totally different appearance.

"Indeed not, Sir." Jarvis agreed, "No doubt the original paperwork also contains the original name, which he has attempted to hide. Most likely when AIM diverted into illegal activities."

"No doubt he had significant cosmetic work at some point." Coulson put in, "Aldrich Killian looks completely different now."

So it *was* the same man. Clint stared. That must have cost a *fortune*! The teeth alone…

Though thinking back Clint remembered Tony mentioning that Killian had had bad teeth and everything else once. He just hadn't thought it was *that* bad.

“No.” Tony slapped his own forehead, “Maya’s plant. Ficus.”

“Mister Stark?” Coulson frowned, “Are you alright?”

“Maya Hansen was working on a project,” Tony explained, “She called it Extremis. Killian’s been trying to get my collaboration on it for ages. Jarvis, do we have one of Maya’s plants? She used to send them regularly.”

“No, Sir.” Jarvis replied, “She stopped sending them before Afghanistan. After you set the last three on fire.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony cocked his head to one side, a laugh bubbling out of him, “I did do that didn’t I? Do we have any footage of the plants?”

“You conducted extensive experiments on the first few, Sir.” Jarvis supplied.

Footage quickly appeared. It appeared to be of a lab with a plant in a blast chamber. A robotic arm removed a small branch. Clint watched in fascination as the plant started to regrow. According to the small timer in the corner it was in real time, but the rate of growth was visible and dramatic.

Then, suddenly, it exploded.

“Unfortunate side-effect of Extremis.” Tony shrugged, “All of the subjects spontaneously explode if they are subjected to enough damage. Or several other factors. Maya was talking about eventually using it in humans. But it’s still dangerously unstable. Personally I think part of the issue is in the telomerization algorithm. Although there is clearly a lack of intelligence in the direction of the chemical recoding. The hack is *clearly* ill-directed.”

“Explain.” Coulson cut across Tony’s babble.

Actually the best thing to do, Clint knew. Tony liked people to understand how amazing what he was doing was. Even if they didn’t understand *how* he was doing it. So he could boil the most complicated thing in the world down to a few short, pithy sentences if he wanted to. Or down to the level of the person he was explaining it to, if he *really* cared about them understanding.

At least he liked *certain* people to know. The people Tony liked and trusted. Despite Tony's refusal to call Coulson anything other than Agent or Coulson, Clint knew that the Genius liked him. It was simply that Tony was thinking out loud, rather than explaining that caused Coulson to be lost.

"Maya was mixing technology and chemistry." Tony shrugged, "Using nanobots to manipulate a living organism on the intracellular level. Changing the concentrations of different chemicals to improve health, restore vitality and stimulating repair where necessary. Essentially hacking the genetic operating system.

"But there's flaws in the system. Normally when a cell replicates, over time the DNA degrades slightly. This takes time, but with the system sped up…"

"It doesn't take anywhere near as long." Coulson realized.

"No," Tony shook his head, "Then there's the problem of where the energy to repair and-stroke-or replace the cells comes from. Which is the organism itself. But in order to provide energy it has to come from somewhere. Which can, in certain circumstances cause damage to the organism. Which is something that the program tries to repair."

"Positive feedback loop." Coulson concluded.

"Precisely." Tony agreed, "The final problem is the lack of intelligence. The nanobots aren't smart enough. Even functioning with a Hive-Mind. The program is still flawed. It's not smart enough."

"In what way?"

"It checks the DNA sequence looking for transcription errors. Which can occur. And can cause tumours and cancer in some cases. The problem is that there are too many different correct sequences for the system to spot the errors. Not all hair has to be blond. Not all eyes have to be blue. And there are varying shades. That's just the way things are. There are so many genotypes even amongst plants of the same species. And don't even *start* on humans. There's only two ways of getting the results Maya was really after."

"And those are?"

"Take a clean sample of the DNA from the source," Tony started drawing up a list of steps in the air, "Get a geneticist to analysis it. Isolate and remove any anomalous sequences. Any genetic diseases or such like. Encode this new sequence into the nanobots, along with nurture details such as appropriate height and body-fat index… Then let them loose. Of course that is an expensive and difficult method. Requiring a great deal of time and patience as the geneticist would have to be *very* skilled. But I believe it would be possible."

"And the second method?"

“An AI,” Tony replied, “A *learning* AI. My speciality. It would require a lot of programing to get her to understand the necessary differences between all the sequences and proteins. To know the correct body fat ratios for different races. And all the other tiny details. But it could be done… However, it would require a *lot* more nanobots in the organism. Otherwise it would be limiting the potential intelligence of the system. That’s what they wanted from me. They wanted me to fix the Extremis program.”

“Are you sure about that?” Coulson pressed.

“Absolutely.” Tony nodded, “I saw them… They used it. It was an old man. In a hospital bed. I saw him rejuvenated. His skin started to glow with vitality… Then he exploded.”

“If it’s so flawed,” Coulson frowned, “Then why do you think that Killian used it?”

“Because I know him,” Tony retorted, “He wouldn’t trust a surgeon to work on him. No doubt he used his own DNA as the original program code for the first human experiment. Probably improved to be perfect. He wouldn’t want anything messing that up.”

“If it worked on him…”

“It wouldn’t work on anyone else.” Tony shook his head, “The closer the person’s DNA and body type is to the programed version the longer that person will survive. But it will eventually kill them. It just takes longer. That’s what they are. Every person with the Extremis program is a walking, talking time-bomb. Possibly even Killian. No doubt he’s programed the nanobots to provide a strength boost when he needs it. Which will run the risk of causing the positive feedback loop on him, as the energy has to come from *somewhere*!”

“So you’re saying we should be careful when we detain him.” Coulson stated.

“Yes.” Tony nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the Extremis earlier?”

“Because it is remarkably similar to Project Rebirth.” Tony snapped, “Pardon me if I don’t want to give a Government Agency another method of trying to get a Super-Soldier. When I know just how far they were willing to go for the first one. And all the attempts since.”

“You shouldn’t know about those.”

“I’m a Stark. Howard Stark’s son.” Tony pointed out, “Of course I know. He never shut up about Captain America. I remember the documents. The experiments. The theories. I was brought in on a few of them. Just a minor consultant. Not even on the paperwork. But Howard wanted the figures checked. And I was good with numbers. Even when I was only six. Do you think your Captain America knows how many men died trying to follow in his footsteps? How do you think he’d take knowing that every single one of the men he went through Basic with was put through Project Rebirth and that three quarters of them died? That a total of thirty-seven young men have died in various projects over the years?”

"How do you know?"

"Howard Stark's son." Tony repeated, "He had a file on every project. Every experiment. Every trial. Every subject. And every single file he had on the subjects… The *people* had similar notes written on them, by Howard."

"Which was?"

"'Not suitable. Recommend do not proceed.'" Tony stated firmly, "Even the experiments had similar notes. Howard was after another Captain America, but he wasn't *stupid* about it. He just couldn't stop it."

Clint felt his heart freeze as he listened to the words coming out of Tony's mouth. They washed over him in a wave.

"SI got out of the Super-Soldier business nearly ten years before Howard died," Tony carried on, "Stane didn't like it. But Howard was firm. He couldn't take seeing those young lives destroyed. Because it isn't just thirty-seven lives lost. It's thirty-seven young men dead and nearly twice that in failures that leave the body or mind or both devastated beyond imagining. Bruce is one of the lucky ones. He can still function.

"It broke Howard in a way. That and everything else. I never had a father growing up. I had Howard. And yeah, he wasn't a great father. But losing the Captain… It damaged him. He blamed himself. Did right up until the day he died. As much as he lashed out at me… He lashed out at himself ten times worse.

"He hurt for every soldier that never came home. For every soldier that came back on their shield instead of with it. For every flag and every coffin. The Second World War. Korea. Lebanon. Dominican Republic. Vietnam. Grenada. Panama. The Gulf.

"He hurt for every time that his weapons failed to protect the soldiers they were designed to protect… That they were *meant* to protect.

"Howard was broken by something. It wasn't just losing Captain America. Something else happened in Germany back then. I don't know what. But I know there was something. I've read his journals… Experimental journals, but they cover enough. There's a period of time missing. Before… He writes differently to After. That's when the guilt really began to start to show the loss of all those soldiers.

“Stark Men do not do well with losing soldiers. With losing men… With losing friends. And for all that we are made of Iron… We are still human.”

Clint could feel his heart breaking. Tony was so calm and blunt about what his father had been like. And it was equally clear that although Tony knew it wasn’t normal, it had been *his* normal.

And if Howard had been hurting so much and only Tony had noticed… Well, it might easily explain why Tony was so good at wearing a false face. He’d learned from Howard from an early age.

“I don’t want to talk anymore.” Tony turned away and looked back to the floating images.

Coulson wasn’t a fool. Clint would be last person to accuse him of that. The Agent could tell that Tony wasn’t going to talk anymore on the subject.

He discretely left the room.

Clint, just as silently, slipped out of the air vent.

“Who is he?” Clint asked softly.

“Who?” Tony cocked his head to one side, as he turned around.

“The photo.” Clint pressed gently.

“Yinsen.” Tony smiled softly, “He told me we met before. I just… I was so drunk I couldn’t remember.”

“So you met him another time?”

“Everyone seems to think that I put this into my chest by myself.” Tony’s hand rose to tap his chest.

"You didn't?" Clint asked.

Inwardly he was kicking himself. Of *course* Tony didn't. It would be damn impossible to do such surgery on yourself. Even if you *were* a genius.

But he'd never thought about it. It simply was. Tony had the Arc Reactor. That was the way things were. It was that way. It just was.

"He was there." Tony had turned away from Clint, "He saved my life in the first place. Gave me the time to build this. Another prisoner. It was just the two of us. We had to rely on each other. There was no choice. I didn't understand much of what they said. Or even what was going on at first. He'd been there longer and he knew the language a bit."

"He helped you build the Arc Reactor?" Clint murmured.

"Of course." Tony shrugged, "I needed the help. I couldn't do everything on my own. Not in time. He'd bought me a week with his electromagnet and car-battery set up. I had to complete the Arc Reactor in that time, or I'd die. It was a very important week for me. Once we'd build it, he installed it."

"Where is he now?"

"With his family," Tony replied, "I couldn't keep him from them. You know, when we were in that cave he asked if I had anyone to come back to. Anyone waiting for me. When I said no-one he said I was a man who had everything and nothing. He had nothing and everything."

"Hey," Clint wrapped his arms around Tony and pulled him back to lean against him, "That may have been true once… Not that I believe it… You had Rhodey and Pepper and Happy. They were all waiting for you. They were all counting on you to come home. You had them. And now? Now you've got me and Steve and Phil and Natasha and Bruce and Thor and Sam and Jane and Darcy as well. We'd find you. No matter where. No matter who. We'd find you… Because we'd never stop looking. Not one of us. Come on, how long did Howard look for the Captain? You think I'd let myself be outdone by him?"

"No." Tony's response was barely a whisper.

"Exactly." Clint agreed, "Come on. That arm of yours is meant to be in a sling, and you know it."

Clint deftly placed Tony's arm back in its sling, which still hung around the Genius' neck.

“It gets in the way.” Tony moaned.

“It’ll help you heal quicker.” Clint countered, “Fancy a movie?”

123456789

“I think I know who Iron Man is.” Hawkeye announced at the next Avengers meeting.

“What?” The Captain blurted out.

“Who?” Coulson demanded.

“How?” Banner blinked.

“Verily?” Thor boomed.

“Yinsen.” Hawkeye stated, “He was a fellow prisoner with Tony in Afghanistan. He helped Tony build the first miniature Arc Reactor. And it is most likely that Iron Man runs off an Arc Reactor.”

“Would he have the intelligence to replicate the process?” The Falcon asked.

“He was invited to a scientific conference in Switzerland in ’99,” Hawkeye shrugged, “I’d assume he’s no idiot. And he came up with the electromagnet idea that kept Tony alive long enough to create the Arc Reactor.”

“Gulmira,” The Captain pointed at Hawkeye, “The first sighting of Iron Man was in Gulmira. He dealt with a group of terrorists there. And Tony said that Yinsen was from Gulmira. What if he started off protecting his home?”

“And then started on his vigilante streak?” The Falcon raised an eyebrow, “It’s not beyond the realm of possibility.”

“Where is he now?” Coulson pressed.

“All Tony said was that he was with his family.” Hawkeye replied, “I don’t think he actually knows. Certainly he’s never tried to communicate with him. Or we’d have heard about it by now.”

“It’s the first time I’ve ever heard of him.” Rhodey nodded, “And if he’d needed help, Tony would have said something when I brought him out of the desert.”

“Would not our Tony,” Thor frowned, “Have granted him great wealth for his deeds? He is not ungenerous with his friends.”

“He wouldn’t have kept him from his family,” Spiderman pointed out, “That’s not Tony.”

“If Yinsen had any sense he would have made himself disappear.” The Black Widow added, “No doubt the Ten Rings would have sought retribution against him if he stayed local.”

“If thy enemy is vanquished,” Thor declared, “They should learn to stay in their place.”

“Would you?” The Captain challenged.

“No,” Hawkeye put in, “You didn’t. I know you didn’t. I saw. Remember?”

“I was protecting another.” Thor reminded.

“It’s human nature.” The Falcon sighed, “We fight back. We are fearless. Getting back up and fighting for what we want over and over again. Even if we lost the last time.”

“Fall seven times,” The Captain smiled, “Rise eight.”

Chapter 41: Chapter 40

It really wasn't a surprise that Tony was back in his workshop far earlier than anyone was really comfortable with.

Though Clint thought it was an improvement in that Tony hadn't blacked out the windows and thrown up soundproofing.

Tony was clearly working on some sort of tracking device judging by the maps and depictions of satellites in space that Jarvis was helpfully throwing up.

Strangely the music was different to what Tony usually played. Less AC/DC, more… Something else.

Not bad, but…

Not Tony's usual.

"What's up with the music?" Clint asked, leaning against the doorframe.

"What?" Tony spun around, nearly singeing his fingers with a soldering iron.

"The music." Clint repeated, "It's not your usual head-banging stuff."

"Oh," Tony laughed lightly, "It's Steeleye Span. Briar's really into their stuff. And it's not bad. He'd told me I'd like it if I gave it a chance. And I have to say, it's alright. For Folk."

"This isn't folk." Clint argued.

"They're a Folk-Rock band." Tony shrugged, "This is one of their more recent albums, Wintersmith. I quite enjoy the Dark Morris. Though Briar prefers the Nac Mac Feegles. I think he's projecting there."

"Projecting?"

“Never mind,” Tony waved his hands dismissively, “I do need to have a word with you though. What were you thinking? Taking Peter with you to run your computers? I mean I know he’s your Intern, but he’s Stark Industries’ as well. I’m not really happy with you borrowing him for your security company’s business.”

“It wasn’t.” Clint replied easily, “We were looking for you.”

Tony’s mouth hung open in slight shock.

“I told you,” Clint laughed, “We wouldn’t stop looking for you. Yes, someone else found you first. But we were looking.”

“So you borrowed Peter for that?” Tony’s voice was small and almost nervous.

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, “I thought he would be better than any of our techs. Plus, it wasn’t exactly sanctioned by the higher ups, we just did it. I’m not close with the techs. Nor are any of the rest of us. So we borrowed Peter.”

“And he was okay with that?” Tony whispered.

“Of course,” Clint confirmed, “You’ve got a lot more people in your corner than you think, Tones.”

Tony seemed to be frozen in shock. It was as if his mind couldn’t comprehend that people cared about him. Clint grasped one of Tony’s arms in reassurance.

The song ended and a new one started.

“Is that a bad Glaswegian accent?” Clint blinked at the words.

“Yes.” Tony agreed, “Yes, it is. Just don’t ask. It doesn’t make sense without about five books worth of backstory.”

“Okay then.” Clint shrugged, “I won’t ask. Look, I’m a little worried about you. You still planning on going to the opening in Hawaii?”

“Yes,” Tony answered immediately, “I leave tomorrow. And then a week after that Japan to check the installation. It’s going a lot faster than we thought it would. I should have it up and running well before the official opening.”

“I’m not so sure it’s a good idea.” Clint countered, “Either trip. We worry about you. You’re not a fighter. You’re not… You know what happened this time. Steve’s going out of his mind with worry about you. AIM could come after you again.”

“Or the Ten Rings or somebody else.” Tony fired back immediately, “That’s my life Clint. Afghanistan wasn’t my first kidnapping. It was just the worst. I’m not giving up my personal freedom for security. If I do that I deserve neither. I can’t. I’m Tony fucking Stark. Stark men are made of iron.”

“Then take us with you.” Steve was leaning against the doorframe now.

“What?” Tony blinked, “Steve, I can’t ask you to skip work like that.”

“We’re due some holiday,” Steve shrugged, “I can swing it.”

“Yeah,” Clint quickly followed Steve’s train of thought, “Sure we can. But I’m not so sure about Japan. Something might come up.”

“We’ll discuss Japan later.” Steve cut across Tony’s argument before it started, “I just worry Tony.”

“Look,” Tony closed his eyes and sighed almost sub-audibly, “I’ve been looking after myself for years. I know what I’m capable of. I know when I’m in over my head. And I know what precautions are reasonable. I’m taking every reasonable precaution. But I *refuse* to let myself be locked away like some Princess in a Tower. Even *if* Steve would make an absolutely *awesome* Disney Prince.”

Clint tried to smother a laugh at the image that popped into his head. Of Tony with Rapunzel’s hair.

But then he caught Steve’s eyes and could tell that the Super Soldier was thinking the same thing.

They both started laughing and couldn’t stop. Not even when Tony demanded that they tell him what was so funny.

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It was strange watching Tony at the opening ceremony in Hawaii. He was Stark once again.

But a softer, gentler Stark.

More like the Tony that interacted with his competent scientists.

But he wasn't interacting with scientists. He was interacting with *children*.

Clint knew that Tony was good with kids. He'd seen it after the Battle of New York after all.

But that was with lost, traumatised kids.

This was a class of well-adjusted kids from a local school.

But there was Tony cross-legged on the ground as he talked with them.

"Why are you doing this?" One of them asked.

"Can't I want to help Hawaii?" Tony countered.

"But you're a Haole."

"So?" Tony raised an eyebrow, "You've never seen the Brazilian rainforests or the Arctic Circle. Do you care if they get damaged?"

"Of course."

"So why can't I care about Hawaii?" Tony grinned, "Besides this is proof of concept."

"Proof of concept?"

"Proving that it works in the real world." One of the girls explained, "Before he rolls it out elsewhere. But I thought you had one working at your Tower?"

"I do." Tony nodded, "You're smart for your age. I've proven it can run my Tower. But I need to prove it can work for a larger area. With a larger electricity demand. Hopefully it will work to provide more power than I expected."

“There’s no toxic stuff?” The question was asked, “Nothing to poison our land, sea or air?”

“Nothing.” Tony agreed “That’s why I brought it here. Because you have to import all your fossil fuels and nuclear materials. A self-sustaining energy source, is something your adults have been after for a while here. They need it for you.”

“For us?”

“The Native Americans have a saying,” Tony explained, “You do not inherit the Earth from your Ancestors.”

“You borrow it from your children.” The little girl spoke up again.

“Precisely.” Tony smiled broadly, “You are going to be a very dangerous person when you grow up, kiddo.”

“Why?”

“You’re smart and educated.” Tony stated, “And you think. A very rare combination. Don’t you *ever* let anyone convince you that being pretty is all you’re good for. Any of you. Being smart lets you change the world.”

“Like you? You’re the Merchant of Death. My daddy said so.” One of the other children accused.

“I used to sell weapons.” Tony agreed, “But I’ve changed. I don’t do that anymore. I saw what damage I was doing. I’m trying to balance out the harm I did with good. Making a better world for you and your children.”

“You’re trying for forgiveness?”

“I cannot be forgiven.” Tony shook his head, “I cannot redeem myself. I can only ensure that those who come after me have a better world. I am changing my legacy. Peace instead of violence. Protection not fear.”

Clint could feel the slight pricking of tears in his eyes at Tony’s words. It wasn’t so much the words themselves, it was the tone. Tony truly believed he couldn’t be forgiven for what his weapons had done. But he still wasn’t giving up on the world. He was trying to make it better. Not for his own sake, but for the sakes of those who didn’t even know him. And probably never would.

The children mostly moved on. But the smart little girl stayed behind for a few moments to talk with Tony in private. When she left, Tony watched her for a few moments fingering a small bracelet.

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“What’s that?” Steve asked watching Tony finger a bracelet.

“Oh,” Tony smiled, “One of the kids gave it to me. She’s the daughter of someone I met once. He asked her to give it to me.”

“Why?” Steve pressed.

“I built him a little robot.” Tony shrugged, “Just a toy dog that played music. He still has it. Or rather she does. She thought I might miss him.”

Tony showed off a small locket attached to the hand-woven bracelet. The picture in the locket showed a metal dog, probably no larger than two hands.

“Who?” Steve queried.

“Danny Williams.” Tony replied.

“When’d you meet?” Steve leaned forward.

“Officially we never have.” Tony retorted, “He even signed a confidentiality agreement stating that. Stane insisted.”

“I think you’re missing a few parts of the story there.” Steve laughed.

“You’ve got as much as I’m comfortable with.” Tony closed his eyes, “Some parts of my history aren’t all that nice. And I don’t like thinking about them. Let alone talking about them. Now, we’ve got the rest of a ten-hour plane ride, so I’m going to get some sleep. Like you keep nagging me about.”

Tony lowered his seat backwards and curled up into a ball before he quickly slipped into slumber.

Smiling softly, Steve gently tucked a blanket around Tony.

“Touchy subject.” Clint noted, “Though I don’t blame him.”

“No.” Steve agreed, “He has a lot of darkness in his past. Probably a kidnapping, though.”

“More than likely.” Clint nodded.

“Well, he needs his sleep.” Steve smiled.

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Tony retreated into his workshop for a sustained spell once they arrived back in New York.

It was useful for Clint and Steve. They had to report back to SHIELD and it wasn’t a short debrief.

Which really annoyed Barton, because nothing had happened. It had been a milk run. There was no need for an extended debrief for six hours. Quite honestly it could have been wrapped up in half an hour at most.

However, for some reason the Level 8 Agents doing the debrief were not convinced. Barton wished that Coulson was running it. But he was busy dealing with a separate incident apparently. Barton didn’t know any further details, only that it was causing upset and was highly classified.

That being said, Barton could infer a great deal. He knew it wasn’t anything that was dangerous or there would be more signs of it.

Barton and Rogers were just leaving the debrief, both in desperate need of food and activity (hey, you try sitting still for six hours rehashing nothing), when there seemed to be a strange uplift in the urgency of the Agents moving around.

“What’s going on?” Rogers caught the arm of a hurrying Agent.

“Something went down in Europe.” The reply was quick, “I don’t know the details. Only Fury ain’t happy.”

“This way.” Barton quickly set off, “We’ll check in with Coulson. He’ll know what’s going on.”

As Barton expected Coulson was already making his way from his previous meeting to the main Conference Room. Easily interceptable.

“What’s happened?” Barton asked.

“The base in Sokovia is gone.” Coulson answered.

“I didn’t know we have a base in Sokovia.” Rogers remarked.

“We don’t.” Coulson was blunt.

“What?” Barton frowned.

“It was decommissioned years ago.” Coulson explained, “Not long after the Berlin Wall came down. But we still owned the base. Just nothing was happening there. It blew up about an hour ago.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Rogers pressed.

“We don’t know.” Coulson shook his head, “We’re still moving Agents into the area to check. But it wasn’t far from the Capital City of Sokovia.”

“Sokovia,” Barton recalled, “Hill once said it was nowhere special, but was on the way to everywhere special. Rough history. They’re not real keen on outsiders.”

“Which is why we shut down the base.” Coulson agreed, “We didn’t want to destabilise the area politically.”

“What?” Barton blinked, “That place is like an old record player. Forty two revolutions a minute. Don’t like their politics? Wait a moment, the government will change.”

“They’ve been fairly stable for the last five or so years.” Rogers countered, “I try to keep abreast of the various political conflicts.” He shrugged, when they both stared at him.

“Is there anything you need us to do?” Barton asked.

“Stay low.” Coulson instructed, “Things are no doubt unstable over there. And they are not fans of the Avengers.”

“We’ll go back home then.” Rogers declared, “You know where to find us, if you need us.”

The destroyed base was on the news. Of course it wasn't announced as a base. Only a castle. It wasn't completely destroyed; there were still some rooms and towers standing. It was a ruin now.

No one could understand how it was destroyed so suddenly. And yet no damage was done to the city nearby. The attack had happened in the middle of the night over there. And no one saw anything.

But it wasn't Clint's problem. It wasn't his case. It wasn't even Phil's case. He didn't need to worry about it.

Phil was working on something else. On the periphery, mainly just getting updates which he sorted through for Fury. But then again, he was Fury's one good eye. He often got those sorts of duties.

Steve got snatched up for another mission and was due to be gone for a few days. Clint didn't know the details, but then again, he rarely did if Steve went off without him. Though he *did* know that this time Steve had gone with one of the STRIKE teams.

Natasha was still investigating something involving the Oil Cartels. Thor was back on Asgard, still trying to connect with Loki (Which Clint tried desperately hard not to think about). Sam was off helping at the local veteran's centre. Bruce was working on something in his lab, but Clint didn't know the exact details. He wasn't even sure he wanted to, but he knew that it was something that both Peter and Jane were interested in.

So when Tony came out of his Workshop, a few days later, with the decision that he wanted to go for a walk, Clint decided to go with him. Partly because he wanted to keep Tony company and partly because he was worried about another kidnap attempt.

It was a pretty nice day actually. Not too hot, not too cold. And Tony always enjoyed walking in Central Park.

Even if it was nearly ten at night.

"Stark." The voice was cold, hard, accented and female.

They turned around to face the speaker. Clint's hand went for a weapon.

A blur hit him and knocked him off his feet.

"Stay down, Grandpa." A similarly accented male voice barked.

"How can I help you?" Tony's voice was remarkably calm and steady, as he addressed the pair.

"You killed our parents." The male snapped.

"I've killed a lot of people's parents." Tony remained visibly relaxed, "What are your names? Then I might remember them."

"Maximoff." The female almost snarled.

"Sokovia," Tony nodded slightly, "Nearly a decade and a half ago. You're Pietro and Wanda. The twins. You survived the dud bomb."

"Two days we spent staring at that bomb." Pietro was clearly furious, "Two days wondering when you were going to kill us. Two days waiting to die. Do you know what that is like? Do you know what that *feels* like?"

"No." Tony shook his head, "Do you know what it is like to stare at a missile you personally designed and know that it will kill you? Do you know what it is like to wake up in a cave surrounded by your enemies undergoing open heart surgery without anaesthetic? You don't know my pain. I don't know yours."

"You brought that on *yourself*!" Pietro declared, "You deserve everything that happened to you. And everything that *will* happen to you."

"For what you did to our parents and all the other people in Sokovia." Wanda agreed.

"And what will happen to me?" Tony asked softly.

“You will pay for what you did to them.” Pietro was firm, “You will die for what you did.”

Clint drew a knife and threw it. He was aiming at Wanda, but it never got anywhere close.

Pietro caught the blade, his attitude towards it was almost negligent. As if he didn’t care about the attack.

Though the blow to Clint’s head certainly belied that attitude.

“I told you to stay down, old man.” Pietro snapped.

But the words seemed to be coming from very far away. Clint could hear them, but he couldn’t seem to react to them. It was like he wasn’t present in his body.

“Leave him alone.” Tony fired back, “He has no part of this.”

“He protects you.” Wanda accused.

“He’s a friend.” Tony shrugged, “He’s protective. But he’s never raised a hand against your country. He didn’t even know me back then.”

“You *care* for him?” Pietro almost sneered, “You care for no-one.”

“Everyone cares for something.” Tony countered.

“You care for money and power and nothing else.” Pietro declared, “You are the Merchant of Death. Well named. And you always will be.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed, “I am the Merchant of Death. And I should have been more careful. I should have not trusted those I trusted. I should be held responsible for the weapons that were sold by my company that ended up in the wrong hands. Though I never knowingly allowed weapons to pass into those hands it is still my responsibility. I failed because I trusted the wrong people. That is one of my crimes. I was blind to what was going on around me. And because of my blindness, that will be my legacy. My weapons… My designs… My *creations* in the hands of murderers.”

“You are a murderer yourself.” Pietro was firm.

“Maybe.” Tony conceded, “I certainly bear part of the responsibility for what happened. But why kill me?”

“It is what you *deserve*!”

“Yes,” Tony nodded, “It is. There’s an old saying: “Never argue with a fool. They will bring you down to their level and beat you with experience.” Don’t lower yourself to my level. Don’t do that. You don’t deserve that.”

“What do you mean?” Wanda frowned.

“Think about it,” Tony huffed, “What is the media going to report? That a couple of deranged people killed the unarmed Tony Stark in the middle of Central Park. They aren’t going to make you out to be heroes. They aren’t going to make you out to be vigilantes. You will be stone cold blooded killers seeking revenge. Possibly even terrorists. I won’t be hailed a hero. But it won’t get the reporting you want. Your story will be lost. Your hands will be deemed drenched in blood. As bad as my own.”

“What do you suggest?” Wanda cocked her head to one side.

“Wanda!” Pietro stared at her, “Don’t listen to him.”

“We make our own decisions.” Wanda reminded, “But I want to hear what he has to say.”

“Go be heroes.” Tony stated, “Go save lives and stop crime. Protect people. And then, when people ask why you do what you do, and they will ask… Tell them your story. Tell them that you do this to prove that I had no right to do what I did. That you did not deserve what happened to you. That it was a tragedy and a crime. Shame me in that way. Turn people against me with your deeds and words. Only those who already believe in your ideals will idolise you if you counter violence with violence. Counter it with peaceful and good acts and many more people will listen… They will respect you. And understand your actions. Some will even convert to your beliefs.

“If you kill me you will destroy my body and end my life. Do it the other way and you destroy my name. And I am still alive to endure the suffering. Which would you rather? A short time with your names and story known, if they are known at all, before the focus switched to me? Or a longer time with the focus on you and your story?”

“You think we care about that over revenge?” Pietro sneered.

“Yes,” Tony agreed, “Because if you wanted revenge you never would have let me talk. You would have just killed me rather than start this conversation in the first place. You wanted me to know why you came to kill me. You want your story known. But not just your story. The story of everyone you know. The story of Sokovia’s people. The rebels. Those volunteers who didn’t survive.”

“What do you mean?” Wanda frowned.

“You were volunteers, weren’t you?” Tony stepped forward, “To gain the gifts you have. But you weren’t the only volunteers. You know that. You know that better than I do. You even knew their names, I bet. When was the last time you saw them? You know what they did to you. You survived. What about the others? I bet you that the bodies are buried so deep, even their ghosts can’t find them.”

“They would not do that.” Pietro countered, “They would not. They came to *help* us.”

“Did they?” Tony took another step forward, “Has anything changed? Who bought the weapons from me? Certainly not Sokovia. I checked. Your government couldn’t afford them. So who had them? Who used them? Who used *you*? With all their power and science, surely they could have changed things by now. But they haven’t. They didn’t care. They don’t care. You’re just tools to them… No, not even tools. You’re guinea pigs. Test subjects… Look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong. Tell me that you were the only ones that volunteered.”

This time Pietro took a step back.

“There is no way you could know all of that.” Pietro accused, “Unless you were involved.”

“I’m a genius,” Tony shrugged, “And when I realized all the harm my negligence had caused I made an effort to get information on everyone my weapons killed or harmed. When I heard that Sokovia’s castle had been destroyed I refreshed myself on the names. And the stories. I noticed when you disappeared off the radar. And you came back with powers? Not too hard to guess that someone helped there. And others disappeared at the same time. I’m no Sherlock Holmes… But even I can see where this is going. Particularly given that you did not have your gifts before you disappeared.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Wanda asked.

“Because you would have used them.” Tony replied calmly, “You need to learn. Trust only those who will fight with you and for you. Trust those who protect those you care for, without you even asking them to. If you trust too easily… You will get hurt. You will get burned.”

“And why should we trust a single word that has come out of your mouth?” Pietro fired back.

“Because I’m not asking you to trust me.” Tony countered, “I’m simply telling you what I know and the way I see things. I leave it in your hands to judge how worthwhile listening to me is. But I’ll give you something… Wanda, you can make a person see their worst fear?”

“Yes.” Wanda agreed.

“Do you see it too?” Tony queried.

“Yes,” Wanda frowned, “Why?”

“Don’t look for my fear,” Tony moved towards her, “Look for my greatest regret. My greatest guilt. My greatest grief. For if I’m right, they are all one and the same. Look and see. And then… Then decide what you will do. Whether it will be my life that you take… Or if you find a different path.”

Pietro tensed, clearly expecting some sort of trap; while Wanda raised her hands towards Tony’s head.

Clint watched helpless as red mist seemingly leaked from her fingers and drifted into Tony’s head.

Tony’s face freezes for a moment and then…

It was like he’d gone somewhere else inside his head. Somewhere Clint couldn’t follow.

But Wanda could. Emotions flitted across their faces. The precise details were too fast for Clint to follow, but he got the general gist.

There’s curiosity in Wanda’s that changes to general sadness and compassion.

While Tony’s face was filled with grief and guilt. Clint even saw the glint of a tear as it trickled down Tony’s cheek.

Wanda reached up and held her hand so that the tear transferred onto her hand. She stared at it in wonder and amazement.

“So you do have a heart.” Wanda murmured, her voice pitched so low, Clint could only make out the words by reading her lips.

Or at least that’s what he *thought* she said. He still wasn’t at a hundred percent.

Honestly, he was starting to think Wanda or Pietro did something more to him than just hit him twice.

“The man of stone cries?” Pietro flitted over to Wanda, staring at the tear.

“If you prick us,” Tony whispered, “Do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?”

“And if you wrong us,” Wanda continued smoothly, “Shall we not revenge? What shall you do against us, for what we have done this day, should we let you live?”

“I shall not raise a hand against you.” Tony replied, “Nor will I ask any other to do so in my name. I understand why you have come. I understand why you came in violence. But I have learned that violence begets violence. I seek peace these days. And should any come to me to confirm your story… I will confirm it freely.”

“We leave him.” Wanda declared.

“Why?” Pietro frowned, “Don’t I get a say in this? I *am* twelve minutes older, remember?”

“I’ll explain later.” Wanda smiled, “He’s not the man he was. And this will hurt him more.”

She pulled back from Tony, raising her arms to go around Pietro’s neck. Pietro literally swept her off her feet.

And then they were gone.

Tony stayed in his frozen position for a while. A new tear trickling down his face.

Chapter 42: Chapter 41

Tony dashed the tear away; his first motion since Wanda had bespelled him. Though he had spoken, he had not moved.

Then he dashed to Clint's side.

"You okay?" Tony asked, "He hit you pretty hard. And then she did… *Something*. Are you okay?"

Clint looked up at Tony dazed. He couldn't quite get his tongue to work. Though he was managing to move slightly.

"Here," Tony threw Clint's arm over his shoulder, "I've got you. It's okay. You'll be okay. I've got you. I've always got you."

Clint didn't think he'd had *this* much trouble just putting one foot in front of the other even when he'd foolishly decided to take Natasha on in a vodka drinking competition.

Really, what had he been thinking? She's *Russian*!

But with Tony's help, he was managing to stagger across the ground towards the edge of the Park.

Tony was also trying to get his phone out of his pocket, without dropping Clint. Which it turned out to be possible, but only just.

"Darcy," Tony barely gave the person he was speaking to time to answer the phone, "I need you to grab a car and pick Clint and me up from Central Park."

Clint was confused. Tony could just contact any of the Security Guards at the Tower, even if he couldn't call Happy for some reason.

"Because Happy is off body-guarding Pepper in DC," Tony started to recite, "Briar is on annual leave. And the rest of the Security Guards aren't insured to drive my cars. But you are."

Tony trusted Darcy to drive his cars? He did realize that Darcy had hit Thor with a truck, right?

"Extenuating circumstances, sweet-cheeks," Tony fired back, "You told me he appeared out of thin air. You never saw him coming. Just grab a set of keys and come. I'm worried about Clint. And I'm *not* calling an ambulance."

Tony had managed to get them to the edge of the Park.

"Grab one with GPS," Tony instructed, "Jarvis will get you to us, Sparky."

The nickname was new. But then again, Tony *had* meshed with Darcy quite quickly, once he'd decided to trust her. The two of them used snark like it was a weapon. There had been a few quite brutal jabs on both sides, at first. Ones which had made everyone in earshot wince and start preparing for permanent animosity between the two.

But then they had both started laughing and wandered off to go improve Darcy's tazer.

Clint still wasn't sure if it was a good thing that the two of them got on so well.

Steve was quite firmly convinced that it wasn't. But Darcy made Tony smile in a way that meant that Steve couldn't bring himself to stop it from happening. It was like Darcy was the little sister Tony never had.

Clint was fairly certain that he lost some time. It was either that or Darcy managed to break every *single* speed limit between the Tower and them.

Tony almost literally poured Clint into the car. Which wasn't one of Tony's racier models, much to Clint's surprise.

"You didn't fancy the convertible?" Tony cocked an eyebrow, "Didn't think you'd be one to shy away from such a powerful motor."

"Not when I know I'm only going to get a short ride in one." Darcy retorted, "I'll be taking some of your brilliant motors out for a stroll later. Figure I'll cruise down near the clubs and see how many men I can make drool over my boobs and-stroke-or the car. Might even see if I can work out which they prefer."

"Take the Bugatti," Tony countered, "Might as well go head to head against the best."

"I thought the DB5 would be better." Darcy shrugged, "Might get a Bond or two."

"Ah," Tony dismissed the remark, "The plebeians at those clubs wouldn't even get that it's a Classic."

"Goldfinger." Clint managed to get out.

"Hey," Tony grinned, "Welcome back. You alright? Brain not too rattled?"

"Sorta."

Okay, so Clint's repertoire of responses seemed to have reduced down to single word answers. It was still an improvement. Give him time, he'd be back to fully functional in a bit.

"Bruce is checking you over when we get back to the Tower." Tony declared firmly.

"No." Clint tried to argue. More difficult than he expected, given that he only could count on one word answers.

"No argument." Tony countered, "You weren't moving. God, you weren't *moving*! I thought you were dead or dying. I had to make sure you were safe. I had to keep their attention on me. I couldn't let them kill me or you would have been left alone. Possibly *dying*. And I didn't know *when* someone else would come by and find you. I can't… I can't lose you too. I can't do that again."

There was more grief and pain in those last two sentences than Clint had heard in a long time in Tony's voice.

"Again"? That was the key word. Or one of them. The other was "too".

Who else had Tony lost?

Flicking his mind back, Clint decided on Jarvis. It was clear to him that Tony barely knew Howard. And he never talked about Maria.

Clint didn't know anyone else in Tony's life that would elicit this kind of emotional response.

It was touching, but not what he really wanted to think about right then.

He *had* to get full mobility back quickly if he wanted to avoid Bruce's poking and prodding and declarations that he *wasn't* that kind of doctor.

(Even if he was better than ninety-nine point nine percent of all the other doctors Clint had ever seen.)

123456789

Another day, another Supervillain attacking some random place.

Okay, so it didn't happen every *day*. But it was often enough that Hawkeye knew the flow of things.

And if it were a villain they'd faced before, he could often predict how things would go.

This?

This was wrong.

Iron Man wasn't behaving right. Not for him.

They'd taken too long to reach the SHIELD Base. Usually if they took too long to get to the Base, Iron Man and the Winter Soldier would have left.

This time?

They'd hung around.

Sure, the Avengers *still* couldn't find the Winter Soldier's hide. And he was *still* being damn annoying with his just so carefully placed shots and laser pointer. Sometimes he didn't even fire the shot, just using the laser sight to make whichever Avenger had gotten too close *this* time back off.

And Iron Man was flitting about all over the shop.

But there was nothing keeping them there.

The Base was totalled. Even more so than usual for the pair. It was making the terrain tough going, as the rubble was unstable to say the least.

The only really *good* thing about the situation was that it was in the middle of nowhere. So there were no civilians to get hurt, while they rubbernecked rather than getting the hell outta

dodge.

Sure Iron Man would often hang around after he attacked a place, mainly to exchange a bit of witty banter and completely embarrass War Machine with his superior manoeuvrability.

Which he couldn't do at the moment as War Machine was in Syria and would be for the next month or so.

Sometimes he would drop down to ground level and engage with the Avengers in ground fighting.

But he clearly didn't feel like that right then.

So instead he was engaged in a rather entertaining game of chase with the Falcon and Thor

Hawkeye *might* have been willing to believe that Iron Man was simply having too much fun staying just out of the Falcon's and Thor's reach.

But he'd never done that before. And Iron Man had knocked both of the Falcon's guns out of his grip early on.

And he was doing a fair amount of work to stop the Falcon from regaining those weapons or indeed *any* weapons whatsoever.

No, Iron Man had a plan and that was *not* a good thing. Hawkeye would bet on that.

Thor's threat to Iron Man, as long as he stayed out of range of Thor's swing, was reduced to Hammer throws, which he could only do from the ground.

Lightning bolts had been ruled out as a viable attack against Iron Man a while back; after a training accident had caused one to hit War Machine. Upon his report that it actually *charged* the Suit the team realized just *why* Iron Man had never really bothered to dodge the bolts after the first time. Sure they caused cosmetic damage, and possibly a little structural, but nothing Iron Man had to worry about.

All Hawkeye could do was try to get weapons to the Falcon, try and get a shot in on Iron Man and find the *blasted* Winter Soldier!

Not that any of the Avengers present were managing any of the three. The Falcon was getting quite frustrated about it, if the words coming over the comms were anything to go by.

"Get me a goddamn weapon!" The Falcon swore, "I can take the bastard. I *swear* I can! He's bloody taunting me!"

Hawkeye had to agree.

Oh, not about the Falcon taking Iron Man down. That was way, *way* down on Hawkeye's list of "Things Likely To Happen".

But Iron Man was definitely taunting and teasing the Falcon.

And *only* the Falcon.

He'd never had that particular focus before. Never picked one Avenger out from all the others.

Well… Apart from the Captain. But that was to be expected. He was their leader after all.

And it was always the same thing that Iron Man did to taunt the Captain…

The same salute to the Winter Soldier. Wherever he was hiding.

And no, it wasn't possible to use the salute to locate the Winter Soldier. It was either deliberately vague or the Winter Soldier moved too quickly to be found.

Dealing with Iron Man was generally highly frustrating.

And on this occasion bloody *infuriating*.

Just as Thor landed from his most recent flight, he launched Mjolnir at the armoured Villain. Iron Man aileron rolled, barely moving from his flight course, allowing the Hammer to fly past him.

Iron Man banked to dodge the Captain's shield; curving around to perform a full 180 in his direction of flight.

The Falcon followed, turning as tightly as he could, to try and gain a few extra centimetres on Iron Man.

Hawkeye saw what was going to happen before it happened. But could do nothing to stop it.

"Thor!" Hawkeye yelled, hoping against hope that the Asgardian could prevent the disaster happening right before their eyes.

"Falcon!" The Captain and Thor yelled almost as one, as they realized what was going to happen.

But he wasn't listening. Hawkeye could tell that the Falcon had tunnel vision. All he could see was Iron Man. All he was listening to was the noise of Iron Man's Repulsors.

He was completely oblivious to what the others could see. Namely Mjolnir's descending path, which was going to hit him.

Hawkeye couldn't help but cringe when the weapon took out the Falcon's right wing.

However, he was already in motion. Rushing to the place where the Falcon would fall, desperate to catch his friend and ally; the Captain also moving to the same place. Thor had started twirling his Hammer, building up the speed needed to take flight once again.

They weren't needed though. Iron Man turned, clearly aware of what had happened, swooped downwards with an acceleration that Hawkeye had never seen attempted before outside of *spacecraft*.

He caught the Falcon, with a firm grip on his central wing-pack. Quickly reversing the Falcon's descent.

Hawkeye let out a relieved sigh. He knew what would happen next, Iron Man would lower the Falcon to the ground, let him go and fly off. It's what he'd done the few times he'd caught Hawkeye falling off a building or something like that. Had even performed the same service for a few civilians and other members of the Avengers on occasions. Though Hawkeye *was* his most common passenger.

But Iron Man didn't descend. Instead he ascended, and before any of the Avengers could bring themselves to react Iron Man and his reluctant passenger were gone.

123456789

Hawkeye was rubbing the skin just around his ears. He always got pain there when people started yelling continuously over the comms. He really needed a way to adjust the volume to account for that. But no-one would do that, as they thought he needed the volume up higher to account for his partial hearing loss.

If it wasn't for the fact that Tony couldn't know he was with SHIELD Hawkeye would get the Genius to redesign the things.

Scratch that, he might do it anyway. As long as he could confirm that there was nothing in the device that would identify it as SHIELD tech.

But right then… There was still yelling. And he was tempted to just pull out his comm unit. He really didn't need a headache right then.

But someone would notice. And they would object. And then there would be *more* yelling.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Fury was demanding to know.

"It's Iron Man." The Captain shrugged, "He's caught all of us at one point or another. He's never done this before. We had no reason to suspect he would do this."

"You had no reason to suspect he *wouldn't* either!" Fury countered, "He's a Supervillain. You don't trust Supervillains! I shouldn't have to be explaining this to you!"

"Sir," Hawkeye cut in, "Iron Man has personally saved me from falling buildings three times so far this year alone. The Captain a few times and the Widow a couple as well. Then there's the time that he caught War Machine, who got taken out by Doom's EMP…"

"What Hawkeye is saying," The Black Widow cut across Hawkeye's speech, "Is that despite all the fights we have gotten into, Iron Man has never seriously harmed any of us, or allowed us to come to serious harm. While we take fights against him seriously, we are disinclined to expect anything like this."

"This came out of nowhere." Banner agreed.

"And it could have been prevented if you were in the field as well," Fury turned on Banner, "You're an Avenger too. You don't have the right to decide to sit on the side-lines and watch the car every time Iron Man turns up."

"I do if you want the Other Guy not to mess things up." Banner retorted, "He likes Iron Man. Or Tin Man as he calls him. He's more likely to side with Tin Man than with the Avengers. He likes the Avengers just fine. But Tin Man's special. I don't know why. I got the distinct impression that he thought Tin Man was playing throughout the whole of the fight. Same as he always feels."

"Playing?!" Fury was furious, "Playing does not get a team member *kidnapped*! He wasn't *playing* when he nearly killed Rumlow's STRIKE Team. Or any of the other STRIKE

Teams!"

"We're not a STRIKE Team!" The Captain fired back instantly, "We're not a STRIKE Team."

The repetition was softer, more to himself than anything else. It was only Hawkeye's skill in lip-reading that allowed him to know what the Captain had said.

"Why our Noble Brother of the Sky, the Falcon?" Thor asked, "This plan of the Man of Iron was well thought out. He planned for this. Why target him? Why with my weapon?"

"There is no logic behind it." The Black Widow replied, "Why this time? He set it up for this time. And in this place. But why? If he's after a hostage Hawkeye and myself are far easier to grab. If he's after information he'd be better off with the Captain or myself. And if he's after political leverage the best options would be Thor or the Captain. The Falcon does not make sense."

"He's a Supervillain!" Fury countered, "They don't *make* sense. Else Doom wouldn't be trying to seduce the Invisible Woman with wanton destruction!"

"But they are predictable to a certain degree." Hawkeye put in.

"Avengers." Iron Man's voice interrupted the argument, "Approximately ten minutes after I stop talking the Falcon's locator device will be reactivated for one minute. Twenty minutes after that I will be in that location. I wish to talk with Thor. I wish to parley with him. Should we not agree to terms both he and the Falcon will walk away unharmed, provided that I also am unharmed during our discussion. I do not wish to see any of the other Avengers, nor any SHIELD Agents. Nor do I wish to see any weapons. Thor is to leave Mjolnir at the edge of the field. The Falcon will not be visible, until our discussion reaches its close. At present he is unharmed. He will remain so, as long as he does not *try to escape*."

Those three words sounded more like they were directed at someone else. Most likely the Falcon, Hawkeye reasoned. So the Falcon was probably still alive and unharmed enough that he was capable of trying to escape.

"Should Thor not arrive at that location within the time frame," Iron Man continued, "Well… Let's just say that your currently flightless bird, will not appreciate it."

Hawkeye shuddered at that. He couldn't help it. He knew it was a smart tactic on Iron Man's part. What people imagine is always so much better than the reality.

And even though Hawkeye knew that Iron Man had never killed anyone (as far as they could confirm), that left a lot of leeway. Even if he didn't believe, truly believe, that Iron Man would really hurt any of them… There was always the Winter Soldier, who had no such compulsions to leave them unharmed.

Past trends were useful predictors of the future, after all.

Iron Man had cut the connection. For a long moment the Avengers were silent and still.

Then they burst into action.

"I'll sort the tracking system." Banner declared.

"Wire." The Black Widow went hunting in the Quinjet.

"First Aid kit." The Captain stated.

"I go alone." Thor announced firmly, "I will not have our Sword Brother injured again, because of my folly."

"We know that," Hawkeye nodded, "But we don't want you to get injured during this. So we're making sure you have back up. I'll be there too."

"The Man of Iron said I was to be alone."

"No," The Black Widow shook her head, "He said he didn't want to *see* anyone else. And he won't. Hawkeye will remain hidden. The rest of us will be nearby just in case."

"The Man of Iron has honour." Thor reminded.

"He did once." The Black Widow countered, "But he's changed a lot since the Battle of New York. I do not think that his team-up with the Winter Soldier is good for him. He is becoming more ruthless. Less rational. His attacks have no sense."

"They didn't before." The Captain argued, "At least not until we learned his reasoning."

"That was businesses," The Black Widow reminded, "This is SHIELD. We protect people. That's the central principle. Always has been. Always will be."

Hawkeye smothered his smile. For all of the Black Widow's history, she had really bought into the SHIELD ideals and principle. Probably because it was so very different to what she had seen and experienced before. SHIELD was her guiding light. She could use the very things she was taught in the Red Room to protect others. To stop others from ending up like her. Which was something she desired to do beyond all else.

No more child assassins. No more lost childhoods.

Sure she'd spent several months, perhaps even two years, trying to find the evil inside SHIELD. Find the darkness that she had believed *had* to be there. Because nothing could be pure and clean and right like that. She'd never found it. Because it wasn't there.

But that wasn't important right then.

What was important was getting the Falcon back.

Chapter 43: Chapter 42

Hawkeye had settled himself up a tree. It was pretty much the best position for a sniper to cover the meeting.

In fact, it was the *only* position. Which automatically made it suspect. A single tree on a small hill, looking downwards at the field.

There was woodland backing onto the field, at right angles to Hawkeye's position.

The rest of the Avengers could have easily hidden in there. But it was too obvious. No-one was willing to risk the Falcon's safety on Iron Man not spotting them. Even having Hawkeye in position was running a risk, but equally they weren't going to risk Thor's safety.

Thor was already in the middle of the field. Mjolnir only just visible at the edge.

Iron Man was yet to be seen. However, there were still two minutes on the clock.

Hawkeye wouldn't put it past the Armoured Supervillain to be scouting the area, checking for the Avengers.

Hence why the other Avengers were approximately two miles away in the Quinjet, waiting for the signal to rush in.

With only half a minute to go, Iron Man appeared, swooping out of the sky to land in his characteristic pose. It was so distinctive that almost a third of the online fanart of him depicted that pose. The other two thirds were almost exclusively made up of his hovering pose and the explicit artwork that suggested Iron Man was having relationships with everything… And Hawkeye did mean everything. It didn't necessarily have a pulse.

And the fact that he knew that was worrying. Though not as worrying as the fact that he had been told that by one of the SHIELD analysts, whose *job* it was to study the artwork and figure out if the person knew more than they should about Iron Man or SHIELD.

Now that was a bad job, Hawkeye shuddered slightly, even as he took aim on Iron Man.

"Man of Iron." Thor intoned. His voice coming over the hidden wire clearly.

"Thor Odinson." Iron Man rose to standing, "My thanks to you for attending. I was not certain you would come."

"I would not abandon a Sword-Brother." Thor replied, "Your threat was worrying."

"I am not a violent man," Iron Man stated, "Be reasonable and nobody gets hurt. If you decide to be unreasonable it's not my fault if everybody gets hurt."

"Is this to be our topic of discussion?"

"No," Iron Man shook his head, "I wish to request an Oath of you."

"Oaths I will not swear without knowing their contents." Thor countered.

"Of course. I would expect no less. In my recent escapades, as I have heard them called, I have come across an item I believe to be of Asgardian origin. If not of Asgard, then of interest *to* Asgard. I wish you to swear in your Father's name, *on* your Father's name, that if you also believe it is of interest to Asgard that you will return this item to your Father's Halls this very day."

"That is all?" Thor was confused, "Why would you wish that it be returned to Asgard?"

"We had the Tesseract for over seventy years. And what did we do with it? We made weapons. Powerful, destructive weapons. We could have changed the world for the better. Made it safer. Instead we made it worse. We had power and we sought more power. This artefact… It has power. I do not wish for more power to be sought using it. I do not wish for more lives to be lost, because of the insatiable lust for power that many have."

"And you do not seek power?"

"No." Iron Man was firm.

"Do you not fear that I will ignore my oath to you?"

"No. You are many things Thor Odinson. Prince. Warrior. Asgardian. Hero. Avenger. But you are not a liar. When you say you will do a thing, then it will be done. Or if it is not done, it is not from lack of effort on your part. There is no deceit in you. It is not in your

nature. If you swear an Oath in your Father's name, on your Father's name, then I know it will be done."

"Do you wish any harm to Asgard?"

"Not unless Asgard wishes me harm. I swear to you, Thor Odinson, on the most precious thing I have in my life, I have no motive in this act other than ensuring this item remains out of human hands. There is no malice in my heart towards Asgard or its inhabitants. The box I have placed the item in, is only a box. As far as I am aware it contains no item apart from the item itself. And I have ensured that the Winter Soldier has not altered its contents in any way, shape or form. I swear all this to you at this time, in this place. Is that satisfactory to you?"

"Most comprehensive, Man of Iron. Why did you choose the Falcon as your hostage against me?"

"He was the easiest to grab with the least amount of harm involved. Also I could use your weapon against him. Thus ensuring that you would feel some level of guilt as to the sequence of events that led to his capture."

"You manipulated me using him."

"Yes." Iron Man didn't seem even the slightest bit ashamed, "I needed leverage. So I obtained it. Will you swear the Oath?"

"Yes." Thor agreed, "I swear in my Father's name, on my Father's name, that should I believe this item of yours is of interest to Asgard I will take it to my Father's Halls this very day and present it to his keeping. Does this suffice for you, Man of Iron?"

"Yes." Iron Man nodded.

He then raised his hand.

The Falcon emerged from the woodland, clearly carrying a large box of some kind. He moved easily and without showing any sign of injury. Though it was clear to see that his wings were damaged.

Or rather one of them was. The other was folded away neatly, as it always was when not in use.

The damaged wing was strapped together, using some kind of rope. It was clear that either Iron Man or the Winter Soldier had tried to make sure that the Falcon could move easily, but

not leave any of his equipment behind. Whether that had been their choice or the Falcon's insistence, Hawkeye would have to find out later.

Though the box was cumbersome, it was clearly fairly light, as the Falcon wasn't slowed or hampered by its weight in any way. Simply by the fact that it wasn't easy to carry, due to its length. Being over half of the Falcon's height in length. Though much smaller in depth and width.

The Falcon stopped when he reached Iron Man's side.

"Brother Falcon," Thor boomed, "Dost thou fare well?"

"They haven't hurt me." The Falcon replied easily, "But I would rather not be here."

"Peace and patience a little while longer." Thor implored.

"Pretty rich coming from you." The Falcon snorted.

Hawkeye had to agree. Of all of the Avengers Thor was the most prone for rushing into things without thinking them through.

However, given the right incentive, they could all do the same.

"Open the box, Falcon." Iron Man instructed, "I wish for Thor to see what he is taking charge of. Then he may decide whether his Oath applies."

The Falcon knelt and opened the box.

Though Hawkeye couldn't initially see the contents of the box, he could see the shock and surprise on the Falcon's face. He could also see a faint wash of blue light that came out of the box, sort of like Pulp Fiction.

"Holy." The Falcon breathed, "Is this what I think this is?"

“Yes. It is.” Iron Man agreed.

“It’s beautiful.” The Falcon murmured.

“Yes. It is.” Iron Man confirmed.

The Falcon reached out, as if to touch it. Iron Man’s hand flicked out and grabbed the Falcon’s shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“Don’t touch it.” Iron Man stated firmly, “I can’t be sure, but I don’t trust it. Too many lives have been touched in a negative way by it for me to risk it.”

“Then how did you touch it?” The Falcon looked up at Iron Man.

“I’m insulated.” Iron Man removed his hand from the Falcon’s shoulder; holding it up, he wriggled his fingers.

“What is it?” Thor demanded.

The Falcon turned the box around.

Now Hawkeye could see the contents. He froze. Memories flooding through him for a moment.

It was Loki’s Sceptre. Loki’s Staff… Whatever you wanted to call it, it was that. The one item in the whole *universe* that Hawkeye feared the most.

And Iron Man had somehow gotten hold of it. How? When?

And why was he giving it to Thor?

“Am I right that this item is of interest to Asgard?” Iron Man asked, closing the box with his foot, “Will you keep your Oath?”

“Verily,” Thor agreed, “Why dost thou return it now? No doubt thou hast had it in thy possession since the Battle of New York.”

“No.” Iron Man replied calmly, “It only came into my possession recently.”

“How dost thou came by it, then?” Thor inquired.

“It doesn’t matter.” Iron Man countered, “Falcon, pick up the box.”

“Dost thou not want something in return?” Thor pressed.

“This particular project has a different revenue stream.” Iron Man replied.

Hawkeye frowned slightly, the phrase was familiar. But he couldn’t place it.

“Take it to him, Falcon.” Iron Man instructed, “And my thanks go with you.”

Iron Man turned, and lifted off, easily flying into the woods, before anyone else could react.

123456789

“I’m telling you I didn’t *get* to see anything!” Wilson snapped at Fury.

“You must have seen *something*!” Fury countered.

Barton got comfortable in his seat, this debrief was going to go on for some time. Fury had gotten the closest to completely losing his cool that Barton had ever seen, when he had been told that Thor had left to take Loki’s Sceptre to Asgard.

Privately Barton was glad to see the thing go.

“I saw the world flying past me,” Wilson replied, “I saw a white van. Didn’t get the plates. There was a logo on the outside of the van. Only saw one side, so I don’t know if it was on both sides. Nor the doors. I didn’t see those. I folded my wings down as best I could. I

don't think that Iron Man was particularly worried if my wings caught the edge of the doors. Once inside he shut the doors and cuffed me. The box was on the floor.

"He just sat on the bench in the back. It was like an army transport vehicle. Only without the open back. He'd cuffed my hands in front of me. Probably to accommodate the wing pack. But he wasn't cruel about it. I couldn't run for it. Because he was opposite me. He would have seen anything.

"After a while the Winter Soldier turned up. He looked at me and sighed. Then bound my broken wing in place. He and Iron Man argued."

"What did they say?" Romanov leaned forward curiously.

"I'm not sure." Wilson shrugged, "It was in Russian. At least I *assume* it was Russian. It certainly *sounded* like Russian. I don't speak Russian. But I do know an argument when I hear one. It wasn't about me though. I think it was about who was going to drive. The Winter Soldier won. He climbed forward into the front seat."

"You *drove* to the meet?" Banner blinked, "I would have thought…"

"Gave him less chance to escape." Rogers countered, "It is logical. Although unexpected."

"I didn't know where we were going." Wilson stated, "I tried to bolt at one point. He seemed to be distracted."

"How could you tell?" Barton asked, "I mean there's no face on the suit to tell."

"No." Wilson shrugged, "But when I had glanced at the door before, he'd shifted slightly, as if preparing to take action. He didn't react. So I figured he was distracted. I tried for it. Reckoned the wings could take the worst of the fall. And we didn't seem to be moving all that fast. Certainly we weren't rushing. But he grabbed my wrist just as I got to the door. He wasn't distracted enough."

"Did he hurt you?" Banner queried.

"Not a bit." Wilson held up his hand, "He barely touched me. It was a bit like the handcuffs. I knew I couldn't get my hand through his grip. He knew it too. He didn't need to tighten it."

"That must have been when he was talking to us." Rogers stated the obvious.

"Giving his ransom demands?" Wilson cocked an eyebrow.

"Arranging a parley." Romanov corrected.

“Huh,” Wilson blinked, “We stopped after a bit. The Winter Soldier climbed back in the back with us. We waited for a fair while. Then Iron Man opened the back of the van and we got out. He was carrying the box. The Winter Soldier had a gun pointed at me.”

“Did you glance backwards?” Romanov leaned forward again, “To see the gun?”

“Yes.” Wilson nodded.

“So you saw the van.” She stated, “Did you see the licence plate?”

“No.” Wilson frowned, “Wrong angle. I saw the side… I saw the logo. A stick figure. A stick figure in black. Almost looked like it was doing the Egyptian walk. Had a circle over its head.”

“Like this?” Rogers slid a sketch across the table.

“Yeah,” Wilson nodded quickly, “Almost exactly. How do you know it?”

“It’s the sign of The Saint.” Rogers sighed, “Series of stories from my time. Main character was Simon Templar. Sort of like a modern Robin Hood. I doubt it’s going to help. Probably something that Iron Man put on there, himself.”

“Great.” Fury snapped.

“Iron Man put the box down, when we were out of sight of the van.” Wilson continued his story, “He flew off. I went to follow, but the Winter Soldier stopped me.”

“How?” Romanov demanded.

“He said, “Nyet”.” Wilson shrugged, “Grabbed my wing. I could just about see Thor. I went to yell, but he put a hand over my mouth. Kept shushing me. Gentle about it though. Nervous, I think. Certainly acting odd… Kind of like a small child who’s been told to be gentle with a cat.”

“You didn’t try to get past him?” Fury frowned.

“He had a gun.” Wilson countered, “And correct me if I’m wrong, but he’s a notorious assassin. A sniper on the same level as Barton. I’d have been dead before I got half a metre. And… I don’t know. He didn’t scare me. I knew I’d be okay.”

“How?” Coulson cocked an eyebrow.

“He’s a veteran.” Wilson started slowly, “Bit of PTSD there. Recovering. Not a born killer. A protector at heart. Iron Man’s the thing he’s protecting now.”

“When did you get your psychology degree, Staff Sergeant?” Fury snapped, “Stick to the facts. You aren’t qualified to make those observations.”

“Fine,” Wilson’s voice turned cold, “Heavy Russian accent. Broken English. He eventually removed the cuffs, got me to pick up the box and walk to Iron Man. Though he

called him something else."

"What was it?" Banner asked.

"Crysta-noy-ets." Wilson closed his eyes as he sounded out the word.

"Крестоносец." Romanov quickly suggested.

"That was it." Wilson opened his eyes and nodded at her.

"It means Crusader." She translated, "Odd word for him to use."

"I don't care if he calls him a Purple People Eater!" Fury snapped, "I want the two of them *dealt* with. Your number one priority is to stop those two, by whatever means necessary! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Director." The group intoned.

Fury swept out of the room.

"WCS's leaning on him again, aren't they?" Barton sighed.

"Unofficially, no." Coulson replied.

"So, yes." Romanov muttered.

"If the Winter Soldier has bad English," Rogers pondered, "Wouldn't he find it hard to live in New York? And not stand out?"

"Not really." Banner shrugged, "There's some really pretty insulated sectors. If he stayed in areas like Brighton Beach… No one would ever notice."

"Why do you assume he's in New York?" Wilson asked.

"Everyone knows Iron Man has claimed New York." Rogers pointed out, "It makes sense for the Winter Soldier to stick close to his partner. And I doubt he's spending all his time hiding away in a little room."

"He might be." Romanov countered, "The Winter Soldier is never seen outside of missions. With all the people he has killed there is a long list of enemies looking for him. It would be sensible."

"Let's not talk about that right now." Wilson declared, "There's more important things to discuss… How are the arrangements going for Tony's Japan trip?"

"I am unable to go to Japan." Coulson stated.

“Summer of ’11.” Barton murmured to the others, when he saw most of their confusion.

“Don’t ask.” Romanov added, sotto voce.

Seriously. Don’t ask. Barton still wasn’t sure how his Handler had managed to do what he did with a Bonsai Tree, two pairs of chopsticks, three anime action figures, a Japanese folding fan and a Geisha.

Needless to say there were quite a few people who had had a vested interest in making sure that Coulson never left Japan. They’d been extremely disappointed when Barton and Romanov had managed to smuggle Coulson out. It wasn’t likely that they’d let the same thing happen again.

“I’ve organised a team I trust to protect him.” Coulson continued, as if he were completely unaware of the interruption, “However we have also taken the precaution that he is not going to go anywhere other than the Power Station and his hotel.”

“Cut down on the chances of interception.” Romanov nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know.” Wilson frowned, “Seems awfully restrictive. Look, don’t glare at me. I want Tony safe as much as the rest of you, except possibly Steve. But restricting his movements isn’t going to help. He’ll basically be a prisoner. And he won’t react well to that. Not with his history.”

“It’s only for a short while.” Romanov shrugged, “A week. He can cope for that long.”

“It’s a five-star hotel.” Coulson agreed, “He’ll have full access to all the amenities in it.”

“Just not anything outside.” Rogers muttered, “I don’t like it. I understand why. I get it. But I don’t like it.”

“It makes things easier for Agent Sitwell.” Coulson pointed out, “As well as the rest of his team. It was his decision. We cannot interfere with that.”

“Which one of them is sharing Tony’s room?” Barton asked.

“None of them.” Coulson replied, “Tony insisted that he take one of his own people. A James Stevens has been assigned. He will share Tony’s room. He is fairly highly ranked in SI security and often is Hogan’s second when protecting Tony directly.”

“Never heard of him.” Rogers frowned.

“Wait,” Barton thought for a moment, “Does he go by Jimmy?”

“That is a known nickname for him.” Coulson agreed.

“I’ve heard of him.” Barton nodded, “Parker says he’s a good guy. Good fighter. Loyal as hell. Jarvis trusts him.”

And that was that. Despite what many people would think, Jarvis’ trust was something very hard to gain. Tony had programed his paranoia into Jarvis many years ago, but without his arrogance and occasional irresponsibility.

Jarvis guarded Tony as firmly as the Avengers did. Possibly more so.

123456789

“No. No. No!” Clint jerked as he heard Tony yelling.

Heedless of any danger, Clint turned and ran towards the source of the shouting. It was the workshop.

Tony was standing in the middle of the workshop, shouting at a screen. On the screen there was a suited man, clearly taken aback.

“I gave you the list.” Tony snarled, “It only had *two* names on it for you this year. *His* name was repeated from last year. And the year before that. That list is not a suggestion. It never was a suggestion. It was an instruction. One that it is written into your *contract* that you will abide by.”

“He is not a suitable candidate!”

“I. Don’t. Care. You’re fired!” Tony snapped back, “Jarvis cut call.”

The screen went blank.

Clint was staring at Tony. He'd never seen this side of Tony. He thought he'd seen Tony in all his moods: elated, shy, angry, defensive, hurt, shocked, grieving.

But he'd never seen Tony like this. He was righteously furious.

"Call Pepper." Tony instructed Jarvis.

"Tony?" Pepper frowned slightly as she appeared, "What is the problem? I've got an important meeting in five minutes. So you have three."

"I just fired the Head of HR for the San Francisco Branch." Tony cut straight to the chase.

"What?" Pepper jerked, "Why? Tony, you had better have a real reason. Or we are going to be sued *so* badly."

"He censored the list." Tony replied quickly.

"Okay," Pepper nodded, "Breach of contract. We're in the clear. Is there any reason *why* he would decide to censor the list though?"

"Lang." Tony shrugged, "A non-violent ex-con."

"We've discussed hiring criminals before." Pepper started.

"How is a non-violent ex-con any worse than the Playboy Bunny or the former Porn-Star?" Tony cocked an eyebrow, "Lang never hurt anyone. And he is a good guy. Has a heart. Because he got censored, he has just been arrested for another crime, escaped and is now on the run. He was trying to go *straight*! We could have helped. We were going to help, only the list got censored. So he went back to crime, because he had no other options."

"Understood." Pepper didn't even bat an eyelid, "I will finalise the immediate firing of HR for San Francisco, and start the procedures for hiring. Am I to presume that you wish a full accounting of all hirings and firings that he has done in his time in the role?"

"Absolutely," Tony agreed, "You're the best. Also alert Legal, we may need to organise some Out of Court Settlements if this turns out to be as bad as I fear. I'll want a standard package for Lang, automatically."

"Will that be all, Mister Stark?"

"Yes, that will be all, Miss Potts."

The connection cut again.

“Jarvis,” Tony turned back to his worktop, “Locate a reasonable sum as an apology for Lang, from my accounts. An even million should do it. I should have been more on the ball.”

“Very good, Sir.” Jarvis replied instantly.

“What?” Clint muttered from the doorway.

“Huh?” Tony spun to face Clint, “Clint… How long have you been there?”

“Since just before you fired the guy.” Clint answered, “You mentioned a list. What is the list? And who is Lang?”

“The list,” Tony sighed, “I keep my eyes open for talented people. People with flair and imagination and skill. Not always scientists and engineers. But people that are good at what they do. If they impress me enough they go on my list. My list for recruitment. Every HR personnel has it written into their contract that any person on my recruitment list is to be offered a job. At a level I state. I don’t make them managers if they’re not ready for that. I don’t make them bigger than they are. I give them a chance at a job which they can then work up the promotion ladder the same way as anyone else. They’re not favourites. They’re not special. They have to earn promotions and work to keep their jobs. But I give them a chance. Generally, the list gets broken up, so that each branch of SI goes after those in their area rather than trying for people miles away.”

“And Lang was on your list.” Clint realized.

“I don’t really care about a person’s past or present when I put them on my list.” Tony shrugged, “It’s about skill, ability and personality. Lang’s a Robin Hood at heart. A burglar. Not a robber, because he never threatened anyone. And a Hacktivist. He robbed criminals and returned the money to their victims. When his daughter was born, he went straight. Got a good job with VistaCorp. While working there, he discovered there was a flaw in their computer system. It meant that the customers were being overcharged, and didn’t even know it. He corrected it and reported it. They told him to reverse his correction. They were fully aware of what was going on. They just didn’t care. Eventually they fired him. Because he was standing on his morals.

“So he hacked their system. Returned the money. Put the evidence of what they had done online. And burgled the CEO’s mansion. The police caught him just after he put the car into the pool.”

Clint snorted. Clearly this Lang was someone with a similar sense of humour and justice to Clint’s own. And yeah, he wasn’t exactly getting justice the legal way. But Clint couldn’t help but feel it was in the right.

And besides, Clint had walked that side of illegal, but right, before himself.

"So you wanted to hire him." Clint returned the conversation to the subject, "But your HR guy in the area decided to go against your orders."

"Yes." Tony nodded, "And when Lang *applied* for a job, which he should never have *had* to do, it was rejected it out of hand. That's not someone I want in my company."

"But a Porn-Star and Playboy Bunny are?" Clint cocked an eyebrow, "What do they even do?"

"The Playboy Bunny is in charge of all SI social events." Tony replied, "She organises every party and presentation and charity event that SI runs for outsiders to come and peer into our world. She ensures that no waiter, entertainer or any other member of staff is manipulated or forced into other services. Social events have been *so* much smoother since she took charge. Cuts down on the amount of law suits for indecent conduct, and the number of repeat wait staff has increased. So their skill level is higher, so the event is much more likely to be a hit. There's a certain class of individual who don't care what was presented or what the cause was they are simply there to be seen and will bomb your event if they couldn't get *precisely* the drink and-stroke-or canapé they wanted. And strangely these people actually *have* the ability to bomb the event. I'm still trying to work out why. They're famous for being famous and I have to invite them, because they're famous. I don't get it!"

"And the Porn-Star?" Clint pressed.

"Currently rides herd on a bunch of scientists down in Miami," Tony shrugged, "Most people assume he's their secretary. He makes sure they eat, drink and get a decent amount of sleep. He gets them to their important social events, like birthdays and anniversaries. The female significant others don't feel threatened by him and strangely neither do the male ones. I'm still confused about how he's managed that. The best thing is that that particular pack of scientists has the best retention rate and satisfaction rate and achievement rate in the whole company."

"You hired a Porn-Star for his aftercare?" Clint stared.

"Suppose I did." Tony replied.

"Speaking of sleep," Clint took a better look at Tony, "When was the last time *you* got some sleep? Hasn't Bruce or Steve come along to drag you to bed yet?"

"Brucie-bear has a project working," Tony shrugged, "He's been babysitting his samples for two days straight. Sleeping in the lab and everything. Steve's been doing paperwork, I think."

"Paperwork?" Clint blinked.

That didn't sound like Steve. Besides most of the paperwork was Phil's job.

"Researching something." Tony elaborated, "He said it was work related. Looking into a theory about something. Got real vague on the details. Figured it was something classified. He don't pry in mine. I don't pry in his."

Clint cocked an eyebrow.

"Fine," Tony sighed, "I don't pry in his until it starts worrying me."

"Well, you're worrying me now." Clint declared, "Your bags are large enough to hold Tasha's clothes shopping. Bed. Now."

"No." Tony turned back to his work.

Clint grabbed Tony's arms and started to drag him out of the workshop.

"Jarvis!" Tony protested, "Do something!"

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis replied, "The elevator will be ready for you in a moment, and I am currently preparing a shower for you."

"Traitor!" Tony yelled, even as Jarvis opened the doors for them.

123456789

A few days after Tony arrived in Japan it was decided that the Tower's upper storey inhabitants would go out for a meal together.

Not that they couldn't go out with Tony, but it nearly always seemed to turn into a Media Circus when they did that. So unless they were prepared to do some *serious* spy games, it wasn't worth the hassle to eat out as a group.

Besides Tony really liked to order in. Or to eat home cooked food. When they could get him to eat. He and Steve occasionally slipped out, but if the group numbered over four it would inevitably end up attracting the paparazzi.

"Hey, big guy," Darcy nudged Thor, "What's got into you? You're all down and stuff."

"I feel shame, Lady Darcy." Thor confessed.

"What?" Jane blinked, "Why? You haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

"It is not what I have done," Thor admitted, "But what I have not done. I have not informed our Brother Stark about how many Avengers he houses. The Man of Iron believes me to be without deceit, yet I have deceived. I did not believe that I could feel so low for not matching the standards set for me by a Villain."

"You want to tell Tony." Steve realized.

"Verily." Thor nodded.

"Because Iron Man shamed you." Clint breathed.

"Because he believes I am something I am not." Thor declared.

"You can't tell Tony." Darcy snapped quickly, "You can't tell him, Thor."

"You have been the most vocal advocate for telling him." Natasha frowned, "Why would you say nay now?"

"Secrets have a life cycle," Darcy shrugged, "There's a period of time when they have to be kept. A time when they ought to be told. And a time when telling will do more harm than good, because the person you tell will believe, with justification, that you didn't trust them before. This secret has passed into that stage."

"How do you know this?" Jane asked.

"Poli-Sci Major." Darcy retorted quickly, "Governments have secrets. They keep those secrets. When the time comes to tell them, sometimes they tell, sometimes they don't. If they don't, then the next Government tells, part of a scheme to show that they are better than the old ones. Basically saying, "Look, you can trust us. We told you about this, and they didn't." Then they keep their own secrets longer than they should. That's how politics works."

"So we can tell?" Steve queried.

“No.” Darcy shook her head, “Because you’re the same people. You’re the same Government for this example. You telling him, right now? That says we didn’t trust you before, but now your life has been put in danger anyway there’s no harm in us telling you. You’re not saying that you trust him; just that he can’t muck it up.”

“Then, when *can* we tell him?” Steve pressed.

“You can’t.” Darcy shrugged, “Right now telling him will do you more harm than good. And it’ll be worse if he finds out from someone else. Because then that’ll *prove* you never trusted him. You guys have made your beds. Now you have to lie in them.”

“We can’t ever tell him?” Steve sounded heartbroken.

“No,” Darcy breathed softly, “There’s two, possibly three, people in the world who can tell him without this backfiring on you.”

“Who?” Thor demanded.

“Fury, Hill and maybe Coulson.” Darcy explained, “And then only if they emphasise that you kept quiet due to orders, not your own personal choice. I’m not certain that Phil could do it, Tony trusts him too much not to feel betrayed. And neither Fury nor Hill would be willing to do so. Hill doesn’t trust Tony, so she will never agree to telling him. And she *certainly* won’t consider your relationships with him something that needs preserving. Fury has his own reasons to keep things secret. I wouldn’t say that he doesn’t trust Tony. But he believes it is more beneficial to his interests to keep Tony in the dark for now. I suppose Pierce could, but whether he’d want to, I don’t know.”

“Alexander Pierce?” Natasha arched an elegant eyebrow, “Secretary of the World Security Council? How do you know about him?”

“I have an insanely high security clearance thanks to hanging around with you guys.” Darcy retorted, “Somehow I got roped into serving the tea and coffee at their meetings. And no, they don’t know who I am. No one notices the tea lady.”

“True.” Natasha agreed, “I used to get into more meetings that way…”

“With your hair?” Darcy cocked an eyebrow back at her, “You’re far too striking. Everyone would notice you.”

“Dyed it brown.” Natasha shrugged, “Or occasionally dark blonde. Once a very obvious bottle blonde. Did the job. The female terrorist at the meeting thought I was trying to emulate her out of respect. What about your clothes?”

“I keep a respectable outfit in a locker.” Darcy answered, “Phil helped me pick it out. I look professional, but also nothing standout worthy. Low rank. Not of any interest to anyone. I think half the time they forget I’m in the room.”

“You rock girl!” Clint fist-bumped Darcy across the table, “Learn anything interesting?”

“Not that I’d tell you right now.” Darcy smirked.

“Hey Steve,” Clint looked down the table, “Tony said you’d been doing a lot of research recently. What’s that about?”

“Just a theory.” Steve shrugged, “I’m working on it.”

“Need any help?” Bruce asked.

“Not right now.” Steve shook his head, “Maybe later when I’ve firmed it out a bit. Right now it’s not worth talking about.”

“Can’t you even hint as to what you’re up to?” Jane queried.

“Not right now.” Steve was firm, “If I’m wrong… Well, I don’t want to waste anyone else’s time.”

And wasn’t that so Steve? Not wanting to bother anyone else.

“It’s just,” Clint sighed, “You and Tony are getting less and less time together. I’m just worried man. When was the last time you two got some private time? When you…”

“Not that long ago.” Steve interrupted Clint.

“Aww,” Darcy cooed, “He’s married and yet he still blushes.”

“The celebration of your union with Brother Tony is not something to be ashamed of,” Thor pronounced, “Rather you should rejoice in your copulation.”

“Woah there, big guy!” Darcy held up her hands, “I’m all for teasing, but that’s going a bit far.”

“I do not understand.” Thor frowned.

“I’ll explain later.” Jane promised, “Let’s just steer clear of that topic for now. Certainly it’s not something Migardians like to discuss in public. At least not this group.”

“Anyone up for a movie later?” Bruce suggested.

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Sitting around with bowls of popcorn the group were enjoying a movie marathon. They’d even got Phil to join them, having finished his most recent batch of paperwork.

Jane was literally in Thor's lap, something Clint would find amusing if it wasn't the standard position for Jane when they managed to lure her out of her lab to socialise. Being brutally honest she was almost as bad a workaholic as Tony.

"Coulson!" The screen cut from the movie credits to Sitwell's face.

"You couldn't call my phone?" Phil retorted calmly.

"Stark won't come out of his hotel room." Sitwell announced.

"And that is a problem, because?" Phil's voice was deadpan, "If I remember correctly you wished to reduce his movements as much as possible. Surely a hotel room is far easier to protect than a hotel."

"He's done his job." Sitwell countered, "It's all set up. He's even managed to arrange it so he doesn't have to come back here to open it later. But now he won't leave his hotel room to go to the airport."

"Has he given you a reason?" Phil pressed.

"Stevens claims that Stark has a migraine." Sitwell snorted, "I said he should just push on through it. It's not like its debilitating."

"It is for Tony." Steve argued, "I've seen one before. He's not had one for a while. But he gets the full blown sort. Can't handle light. Can't handle sound. He curls up on the nearest flat surface and tries to pretend that the rest of the world doesn't exist for at least three days. He tries to move and he'll vomit. Even certain smells can set him off. He literally can't go to the airport."

"My ex-girlfriend used to get migraines." Sitwell countered, "She could cope."

"They're different for each person," Bruce put in, "From the sounds of it Tony gets Status Migrainosus. Debilitating migraines, lasting for over three days, without a precursor aura and has no attribute to another disorder."

Everyone stared at Bruce.

"Look, I'm not that type of doctor," Bruce shrugged, "But I worked as one for a while. I picked up a few things."

"So I've just got to be patient?" Sitwell stared, "I've got a freaking STRIKE team out here babysitting him."

“We used a non-STRIKE team last time,” Phil reminded, “And we lost him. Deal with it.”

“Well, at least he’s in one place.” Sitwell sighed, “How long could this go on for?”

“No longer than a week.” Bruce replied, “If Stevens knows what is going on, and it seems he does, just let him deal with it.”

“I could come out.” Steve suggested.

“No.” Sitwell shook his head, “Better you stay where you are. We can cope.”

Sitwell cut the connection without any further preamble.

“Well,” Sam stood up and stretched, “I’d best head to bed. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

And so he did, Clint remembered. SHIELD had officially recruited Sam. However due to his unique talents and specialised training there were very rarely any missions suited to his particular skill set. So just to make the point clear that Sam wasn’t a free agent like Spiderman or an outside contractor like Rodney, SHIELD would occasionally assign Sam to guard random, unimportant places.

Really it was just a display of SHIELD’s power over the Avengers, and one most of them weren’t particularly happy with. However, Sam simply shrugged and accepted it. He pointed out to the others that he was a Sergeant, he was used to stupid and pointless orders from COs. It was the way of the Military.

It was how SHIELD worked.

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Clint was enjoying a lazy afternoon, lying on the coach on his floor of the Tower. Phil curled up with him while the pair of them watched Dog Cops.

Suddenly the door burst open as Steve appeared.

“Sam’s been attacked.” Steve snapped, “Move!”

Clint was up and out the door before he’d even fully registered what Steve had said. It was like the words had dived straight into his muscles, bypassing his brain completely.

“Attacked?” Clint asked once his brain had caught up with his actions.

“Yes.” Steve nodded, “I don’t have details.”

“Where are we going then?” Clint frowned.

“I know where.” Steve shrugged, “Roughly.”

“Don’t worry.” Phil put in, “I have the co-ordinates.”

“I’m never sure whether to be disturbed or impressed by that fact.” Steve muttered as he clambered into his car. Bruce had clearly already been alerted as he met them down in the garage.

“Go with impressed.” Clint suggested, “It saves time. You filled in Tasha?”

“No.” Steve shook his head, “She’s out with Pepper today. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” Clint agreed slowly, “The Spa thing.”

“With Jane and Darcy,” Steve added, “Thor said he’d pick Tasha up. I’m to send co-ordinates when I know them.”

“I’ll pass them on.” Phil stated, even as his fingers flew over his phone.

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The Falcon was standing outside a warehouse when the car pulled up alongside him, Thor and Natasha touching down moments later.

“Where are the Agents?” Coulson demanded.

“They’re checking to see if anything is missing.” The Falcon shrugged, “I’m alright.”

“Really?” Bruce cocked an eyebrow as he approached him.

“It was a fist-fight.” The Falcon conceded, “I’ve got a few bruises and scrapes, but nothing serious.”

“Apart from a broken cheek bone?” Bruce challenged, “Well, fractured.”

“Not a lot you can do about a cheek bone.” The Falcon retorted, “Just leave it be. I’ll get a bruise tomorrow and shrug it off.”

“Bruise tomorrow?” Clint snorted, “Try bruise now. It almost looks like… What is that? A tiny fist? What did you do? Get into a fight with *Tinkerbell*?”

“Well he was male.” The Falcon countered, “And he didn’t fly. But about the same size, maybe smaller. At least when he was small. Sometimes he was human sized. He kept switching sizes. Kept me off balance.”

“Липунюшка,” Natasha declared, “It is a Russian story, from the Cold War. Of a warrior who could shrink and grow at will. Yet he lost none of his strength when he was small. A soldier the size of an insect. I heard in America he was called the Ant Man.”

“That’s just a tall tale.” Coulson pronounced, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” The Falcon managed to shrug Bruce’s questing hands off, “I just want to know why I’m guarding this place. I mean, I get guarding a SHIELD warehouse or abandoned base. It’s the Brass pulling strings and proving they’re still in charge. But this place? This is an old SI warehouse.”

“You’re sure?” Steve frowned.

“Positive.” The Falcon replied quickly, “There’s a logo on the roof. I’d take you up to see it, but my wings are busted.”

“Thy wings do not appear damaged, brother Falcon.” Thor intoned.

“Internal.” The Falcon shrugged, “He got *inside* them. Think he pulled a few wires. I hope he only pulled a few wires. Otherwise I’ve got to get someone else to fix them. A few wires I can do. The goggles are another thing. They’re going to have to go to an expert.”

Coulson was herding all the SHIELD Agents out of the warehouse.

“We have to check if anything is missing!” One of them protested.

“Do you even know what is in there?” Coulson retorted, “This isn’t a SHIELD facility. We do not have an inventory. How can you know what is missing when you don’t

know what was there in the first place? We will seal the entrance. We will inform Stark Industries and they can tell us what is missing."

"But…" One of the Agents tried to argue.

"Get!" Coulson ordered them all away.

"Anyone got any idea how we're going to find this Ant Man?" The Falcon asked.

"I said he was a tall tale." Coulson reminded.

"May be he was *then*," Steve shrugged, "But what was once Science Fiction has now become science fact. Such as walking on the moon and satellites sending signals around the world. Perhaps someone heard the tales of the Ant Man and decided to create it in reality."

"How?" Tasha frowned.

"I don't know." Steve confessed, "But it could have happened. I mean, we've got an Asgardian God on our side and we've fought giant butterflies from another dimension. It could have happened."

"I think I remember reading an article about something like that." Bruce thought for a moment, "No… Not an article. A statement. A declaration of some kind. It was in Tony's office. Amongst all the discarded paperwork."

"He has a lot of that." Steve muttered, "Stuff that other companies send him trying to get him to collaborate with him or make him jealous. I think he burns it when it gets too much. I often smell smoke in his hair. He might change his clothes to hide it, but he always forgets to wash his hair as well."

Clint would say that explained a lot about Tony, but it really didn't. However, it *was* typical of Tony, so he was simply going to shrug and move on.

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Sometimes it was like Tony didn't even stop to breathe. He'd barely been back in New York for what seemed like ten minutes (but was probably closer to an hour) before he wanted to go off and check the warehouse. Steve had tried to argue against it, using the migraine as a reason, but Tony was adamant.

"I don't see why you have to go *now*." Steve sighed as they drove out there.

Phil and Clint had managed to tag along, Phil ostentatiously on SHIELD's behalf, Clint simply because he was bored out of his mind (at least that was what he was claiming).

"In fact," Steve frowned, "I don't even see why you have to go at all. Someone else can do this for you."

"No," Tony shook his head, "The warehouse… It's not really a SI place. Yeah, it says SI on all the paperwork, but Howard organised that ages back. It's actually his old hanger."

"Hanger?" Clint blinked.

"Howard had a collection of planes and cars," Tony explained, "He kept all his prototypes there. Including his first flying car, which doesn't actually fly. It hovers, for approximately twenty seconds. Apparently the second one flew, I never saw it personally, though Jarvis swore that it worked. Over time Howard started storing other stuff there. As he owned SI entirely at that time, he shuffled the hanger into SI holdings so that it was better protected. By the time SI wasn't solely owned by him, he'd forgotten to move it back into his name. So he switched it to general storage. General paperwork stuff. It's archiving now."

"So why does it have to be you?" Steve pressed.

"You don't…" Tony tailed off, "Howard invented a lot of stuff. Some stuff shouldn't be found again. Ever. It was Howard's decision to keep it out of other people's hands. He said it was too dangerous for anyone to use or create."

"Then why did he?" Clint asked.

"Because we can't help what we create," Tony retorted, "What we *think* of. But we can damn well control what we sell. And once it's in our head… The only way to get rid of it is to create it. And sometimes… What we think is harmless and useful is bloody dangerous. Peggy taught me to destroy or recycle anything that I deemed too dangerous to sell. Howard never learned that lesson. And I don't always follow it. But I try. Some things… They are more than the parts that make them up."

"This is where you keep the stuff that's too dangerous for other people to get their hands on?" Phil breathed.

"Some," Tony agreed, "But it's all hidden away, mixed up with other stuff. Hiding trees in a forest and all that. The exact list of inventory for this warehouse isn't commonly available. And the full inventory isn't available for anyone other than me."

"Okay." Clint shrugged.

He could understand that. If he had access to a dangerous weapon, he wouldn't tell anyone where it was. Not unless he really, *really* trusted them. So Phil and possibly Steve.

When they got to the warehouse (or should Clint call it a hanger?) Tony got a box out of the boot of the car.

With some help, he got the box to the entrance of the warehouse. Where he opened it.

Literally dozens of small machines flew out of the box and spread out inside the warehouse.

"Now we wait." Tony declared as he got out a tablet.

"What are those things?" Steve breathed.

"Ravens," Tony shrugged, "Remote Ariel Various External Nodes. Basically flying cameras linked to Jarvis. He controls them and collects the information from them."

"You sped up the inventory taking." Phil smiled, "How long should this take?"

"An hour at most," Tony replied, "Jarvis, how are we doing? Is the link working?"

"The link is sufficient, Sir." Jarvis' voice came out of the tablet, "Checking inventory."

"If you've got these things," Clint frowned, "Why don't you use them more often?"

"They're pretty breakable," Tony sighed, "I'm working on them. If I make them non-breakable they're too heavy and-stroke-or big to be sufficiently manoeuvrable in enclosed spaces."

"You can get these really small drones on the internet." Clint pointed out.

"These aren't drones." Tony countered immediately, "They don't just have video cameras. They have infrared and x-ray capabilities in real time. They also have audio capabilities, both reception and broadcasting. Plus the uplink to the tablet, which links up with Jarvis. So these are *far* more advanced than anything Amazon is selling. Also I'm not using the quadrotator system, but something else, far more efficient and manoeuvrable in small places."

"I'll stop insulting you then." Clint teased.

"Go play CandyCrush." Tony fired back.

Clint clambered up to a high point, where he settled down and started to play on his mobile. Steve relaxed on the floor, content to simply watch Tony. Phil found a stool, which he chose to perch on while Tony continued to flicker his fingers over the tablet.

About an hour later, Tony was frowning at the screen.

"Jarvis," Tony spoke softly, "Correct me, if I'm wrong but there's stuff here that's not on the inventory."

"You are correct, Sir." Jarvis agreed, "However those items are on an older inventory list. This one, Sir."

"That's the list from when I took over as CEO the first time." Tony's eyes grew hard, "Jarvis, I thought I specified that all those items were to be returned to their owner."

"You did, Sir." Jarvis confirmed, "I have found the memo concerned. However. no one followed through on that instruction."

"Stane," Tony muttered, "One item missing from the older list. That's what was taken. Jarvis, find all files related to the highlighted items on the SI servers. I want them on an external hard-drive and purged from our system. They don't belong to us."

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis replied, "Files being moved."

"What are you talking about?" Steve frowned, "Do you know what is missing?"

"Something that wasn't ours to begin with." Tony stated, "I'm going to collect the other stuff that isn't ours and return it to whom it *actually* belongs to."

Tony grabbed what looked oddly like one of the flat trolleys that DIY stores always have hanging around and set determinedly off down one aisle. Phil and Steve followed in close pursuit.

Clint kept his high vantage point as he watched the group make their way through the warehouse.

Tony tried to get down a few boxes, but Steve quickly took over. Phil had that look on his face that Clint knew meant that Phil was taking notes, so that he would remember all details

later. No doubt it was to report what was in the warehouse that shouldn't have been there. So they could find out who owned the missing item. And possibly what it was.

They emerged from the bowels of the warehouse with about six archiving boxes on the cart. The Ravens had already packed themselves into their box.

"So how are you returning these?" Steve asked, "Do I need to package them up for you? You are pretty useless at wrapping."

"Only because I don't see the point." Tony retorted, "But no… I ought to do this myself. It's only right. He's waited this long. I wanted this dealt with the first day I took charge. Jarvis, do we have anyone working on this work at the moment?"

"No, Sir." Jarvis replied instantly, "Work into this area stopped in 1989. Stane attempted to do some work in this field, but could never find anyone sufficiently skilled to take it further."

"No," Tony sighed, "Anyone *that* skilled I would know about."

"Skilled?" Steve pressed.

"Chemistry." Tony shrugged, "It's all to do with chemistry and physics. Jarvis, when can I next disappear for a full day, without upsetting anyone?"

"You have a free day the day after tomorrow, Sir." Jarvis replied, "It is a Saturday."

"Oh," Tony blinked, "Sort out a San Francisco trip. There and back in a day. I'll want at least four hours on the ground when I get there."

"Will you be requiring sleep at any point, Sir?" Jarvis queried.

"I can cope without sleep." Tony waved the comment away.

"No," Steve interrupted, "He will be sleeping. On the plane if necessary. I'll *make* him sleep, Jarvis."

"Very good, Master Steve." Jarvis agreed.

"What?" Tony looked up in surprise, "You're coming?"

"I'm not letting you go without me." Steve was firm.

A quick side-glance from Phil made things easy and clear for Clint.

“I’m coming too.” Clint stated.

“I don’t need bodyguards.” Tony argued.

“You’re *really* trying that?” Steve cocked an eyebrow, “After Hawaii?”

“Okay,” Tony sighed, “But I’m not hanging around. I’m not happy with all of this stuff. I *told* Stane to get rid of it. Looks like he screwed me over again.”

“Why did you want to get rid of it?” Phil asked.

“Because it’s not mine.” Tony was blunt, “It never was. These are all copies of someone else’s research that Howard got hold of somehow. I never quite found out how. I wanted to return them to their original owner. Howard had no right to get hold of them in the first place.”

There was a flicker of something across Phil’s face. Clint only saw it because he was looking and because he knew what Phil’s emotions looked like. To anyone else it would have been only a normal blink.

But Clint saw the momentary glimpse of two parts surprise mixed with one part relief and one part trepidation.

Chapter 44: Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Standing at the bottom of a set of stairs looking up at a house with a large pile of boxes wasn't exactly how Clint had expected the day to go.

Yes, he knew they were going to return the items, but he hadn't quite been expecting this. An apartment or an office block maybe. But not a very well presented, nice looking house. Although Clint was extremely impressed by the little tower style attachment, that probably had really good viewpoints.

Tony calmly headed up the steps and knocked on the door.

"Stark," The word was cold, "Why have you come to see me?"

Clint was slightly surprised to see it was Hank Pym.

"Sorry if this is a bad time, Hank." Tony kept his voice calm, "But this was long overdue. I'm returning all of your work that SI had in its archives."

"Why?" Pym's eyes were cold.

"Because it belongs to you." Tony shrugged, "I thought we'd already returned them. But a recent robbery caused me to take a full inventory, revealing these items."

"Bring them in." Pym instructed.

Not long later they were all piled in the corner of a room. Van Dyne was sitting at a table, drinking a cup of tea. Clearly not expecting them, but also not concerned about their presence in her father's house.

“This,” Tony held out an external hard-drive, “Is copies of any and all research derived from your work that SI has achieved. This is the only copy of the work. I have purged SI’s systems of it and will not be investigating into this field again.”

“I have only your word.” Pym challenged.

“Hank,” Tony sighed, “Can you get it through your head for just one moment? I’m not Howard. I never was. I never will be. If I was Howard, I’d have hit on Hope at least twice by now.”

“You’re married.” Van Dyne pointed out.

“That wouldn’t have stopped Howard.” Tony countered immediately.

“Even with Maria in the room?” Pym countered.

“She would have picked Hope.” Tony was blunt.

In the silence that followed that statement, Tony raised his hands to rub at his temples. Clint’s eyes narrowed.

Although Tony was trying very hard to hide it, Clint could see that Tony was running low on energy. A lot more of his thoughts were being spoken before passing through a verbal filter.

It was happening more and more often, Clint had noticed. Tony was getting more and more worn out. He needed more sleep.

And Clint wasn’t quite sure what he could do to rectify the situation. Steve was dragging Tony to bed at a reasonable time, when he could. Bruce and Clint and Phil were doing the same… So were Thor and Darcy. And Clint knew that Tasha had done it at least once.

The problem was that Tony would slip back out and go right back to work. And if anyone could figure out how Tony was managing to slip out of Steve’s arms to go back to work, Clint would love to know so that he could stop it!

It was freaking ridiculous that a civilian could sneak out of a soldier’s grasp so easily.

“Look,” Tony sighed, “I’m just going to say that my parent’s didn’t exactly have a conventional relationship. And I am so glad that I found Maria’s diary after she died, else I’d never have been able to look her in the eyes again. Let’s not go any further into it. It is not a good place to go. It is not a good idea. Okay? Let’s just say that by comparison I have a much more normal relationship. Even taking into account gender preferences.”

Clint closed his eyes tightly. He didn’t want to know. He really, really did not want to know.

So he’d better not report this part of the conversation to SHIELD or they would instruct him to find out about it.

“Good to see you though, Hope.” Tony nodded at the woman.

“This is everything?” Van Dyne pressed.

“There’s one item missing, I think.” Tony shrugged, “According to my records it was kept in the same warehouse, but wasn’t there when I did the inventory. I think the thief, whoever it was, stole it. It appears on the list as a prototype of some device. I didn’t look too closely at the name. Do I need to worry? Does anyone need to worry?”

“It would require my knowledge to make it into anything that needs worrying about.” Pym declared, “Otherwise it’s just a paperweight.”

“Good.” Tony smiled, “You know, Hank, Howard thought a lot of you. He used to tell me stories about you.”

“Really?” Pym was dismissive.

“Up until the age of six,” Tony elaborated, “Howard would tell me stories. He told me stories about the Captain, about the Howlies, about Aunt Peggy and about you. I always liked the stories about you and Jan and Peggy the best.”

“Why?” Van Dyne frowned.

“Because they used their brains to solve problems,” Tony grinned, “Not just their muscles. Of course the stories about you and Jan were the only ones that were made up.”

“Really?” Steve blinked, “Howard told you real stories?”

“Howard had a thing for not pulling his punches,” Tony replied, “But the stories about Hank and Jan… They were about the Ant Man and the Wasp. Just a tall tale.”

Clint noticed that both Pym and Hope had chorused the last four words with Tony. His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. There was no reason for four different people to use the same unusual description for a fantasy. Phrases such as “fairy tale” and “myth” would be equally used.

If it was such a thing.

“Hey,” Tony picked up a set of keys, “When’d you lose the tank, Hank?”

“The tank?” Pym’s face flickered for a moment.

“You had a tank keychain,” Tony explained, “God, I loved that thing. I never could find one like it.”

“I’ll pick you one up at the airport.” Steve offered.

“Won’t be the same,” Tony shrugged, “It was fully articulated. Turret and gun moved and everything. Never could find the mechanisms for that. And I brought a magnifying glass once.”

“Why did you get so much time to poke at it?” Van Dyne frowned.

“Oh, Howard used to bring me to meetings with Hank,” Tony waved his hands dismissively, “I was meant to be distracting you. So the meeting could be uninterrupted. But Howard kept forgetting you were at boarding school. I had to find ways to entertain myself.”

“That was mine.” Pym snapped, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I know.” Tony sighed, “I’m sorry. It just fascinated me.”

The front door opened and both Steve and Clint snapped their attention to the person entering.

The man was clearly not related to anyone in the room, his facial features were too different. There was a small scar on his right brow, but apart from that there wasn’t anything particularly distinctive about him. He was a pretty average looking guy. Average height, average build. Even dressed fairly averagely in jeans, t-shirt, zip-up hoodie, just with a leather jacket pulled on over the top.

“Hank,” The man was seemingly oblivious to them at first, “Cassie wants to visit. She’s curious about ants. Whoa, strange people… Tony Stark.”

“Mister Lang,” Tony grinned broadly, “I was hoping to run into you. Though I never dreamed I would be as fortunate as to find you with Hank. I have a document that my lawyers have been trying to get to you for a while. I am also highly pleased that your earlier misunderstanding with the law has been cleared up.”

Tony’s fingers were flying over a tablet. Then he presented it to Lang.

Lang started to read it, but was interrupted when Hope plucked it from his fingers and started to read it through herself.

After a few tense minutes she locked eyes with Tony.

“You are serious about this?” She asked.

“As a heart attack, Hope.” Tony smiled, “Though I get the feeling that a job offer at this point would not be accepted. Even if Pym Technologies might need more than a little restructuring and reconstruction at the moment.”

“Typical Stark,” Pym sniffed, “Rubbing it in.”

“Actually, I’d put it all on Cross.” Tony shrugged, “I guess he overreached himself. If you want, I know a couple of people who were looking to change direction in their careers. Looking to rise and deserving of a promotion, but SI lacks the positions available to give them what they deserve. I can send you their names if you like.”

“What’s in it for you?” Pym snapped.

“Knowing I did a good thing?” Tony raised an eyebrow, “We’re not all out to get you, Hank. I was raised on stories of you. You’re kind of a hero to me. Will you please stop this?”

“The stories were tall tales.” Pym reminded.

“So you didn’t punch Mitchell Carson in the nose?” Tony looked disappointed.

Clint’s eyebrows shot up for a fraction of a second. He easily recognised the name of the Head of Defence for SHIELD.

What had Pym been doing near Carson?

"No." Pym replied, "I slammed his face into the table. Broke his nose."

Lang snorted.

"See!" Tony pointed at him, "That's what I'm talking about. That's what I admire you for. I heard he tried to steal your research and insulted Jan. So you retaliated. I call that fair."

Before anyone else could say anything, Van Dyne passed the tablet to Lang.

"Sign it." She instructed, "The first and third document only. Very generous Tony."

"I should have been more on the ball." Tony shrugged, "Have you started looking at contractors yet? I know the identities of a few good local ones and a very discrete architect. I presume you're rebuilding from the ground up."

"Quite literally." Van Dyne agreed, "You heard what happened?"

"Cross over-reached himself." Tony replied, "I always knew he ran the risk of it. Shame his experiment caused so much chaos and destruction. Particularly at that presentation. But Cross does have a reputation. Despite your guidance, Hank, he always believes he knows everything. That he has accounted for everything in his original experimental plan. When something goes wrong he blames his tools. When things go right he doesn't double check to see if he can replicate it. Whereas I learned years ago to have back-up plans. And back-up plans for those back-up plans. And if that means I finish the project working from Plan M. Then I finish working the project from Plan M."

"Doesn't Hardison die in Plan M?" Lang asked immediately.

"Usually." Tony nodded, "Leverage fan?"

"Age of the Geek, baby." Lang grinned, "We run the World."

Without another word, the two of them, patted their hands against each other twice and finished with a fist bump.

One day, Clint promised himself, he was going to sit down and watch the entirety of Leverage. Rather than the two episodes he'd managed to watch so far. Just enough to know that he enjoyed it and wanted to watch more.

Of course that would preclude getting the time to watch them. And when Clint did get the time to relax, he wasn't in the mood to watch them.

"I'd try and persuade you to take up my job offer," Tony smiled, "But I think you've got a better offer here. Bring your daughter here. Let her learn. Don't ever let her lose her love of science. Which she will get. Because her daddy is her hero. Hope, get used to kids."

"Why?" Van Dyne queried.

"Because she'll turn you into her hero too." Tony replied, "Trust me on that. And she'll need you. A strong female hero. Someone who will remind her that she doesn't have to let people push her down or around simply because she's a girl. Don't let them."

"Of course not." Van Dyne was indignant, "I wouldn't let anyone push me around. I won't let them do it to her either."

"Good." Tony claimed back the tablet, which Lang had put on the table, and replaced it with a slip of paper, "I'll see you around Hank. I'll send you the information Hope. Scott, have a good life."

Lang picked up the slip from the table.

"A million dollars?" Lang breathed, "What is this?"

"This is my apology to you." Tony shrugged, "Because I should have been more on the ball."

"What would you have done if you hadn't found me?" Lang asked.

"I'd have given it to your ex." Tony replied, "It's not made out to you anyway."

"What?" Lang looked back down.

Then his legs gave out beneath him.

“It’s for Cassie.” He whispered, “You gave my daughter a million dollars. Why?”

“Because I should have been more on the ball.” Tony stated, “Your compensation for discrimination by SI will be with you by the end of the week.”

“Why?” Lang asked once again.

“Because I’m not the same man who went to Afghanistan all those years ago. And you’re not the same man who went to jail three years ago.” Tony declared, “We’ve both changed. We just need to remember to hold on to what makes life worthwhile. Hope, I wish you luck with finding Cross. Hank, I’ll leave you to your work. Scott, you ever need a hand, give me a call. From one repentant sinner to another.”

This time Tony really did manage to make it out the front door. Clint and Steve were close behind.

Clint exchanged a look with Steve. They both had questions. But not for Tony.

Virtually all their questions were for the people inside the house they had just left.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter Everyone!

Chapter 45: Chapter 44

Pepper had apparently made the decision that if Tony wanted to go to San Francisco he had to stay for at least a day in order to inspect the local offices.

They managed to wheedle the story of what had happened at Pym Technologies out of Tony, who was surprised that they didn't know, considering that it had been quite prominent in the news.

Though Tony kept tight lipped on the matter as to why Howard and Pym had so many meetings all those years ago. If he didn't know precisely why, then Clint was blind. But Tony kept claiming that he was never told.

As Clint reasoned, Tony might not have ever been directly told, but he most likely had figured it out. But he knew it was meant to be a secret, so he never told.

It was Tony all over. He liked *knowing* things. Not to do anything with them in particular, but just to know them. He was curious. But knew that somethings had to remain a secret.

Clint should feel guilty over slipping something into Tony's drink to help him sleep through the night; only he didn't.

The bags under Tony's eyes were getting to epic proportions. Bruce had finally declared, to Tony's face, that if he didn't voluntarily get some more sleep, they would start drugging him. Something Steve had initially been unsettled by, but upon learning that Tony was starting to reach dangerous levels of sleep deprivation. It was apparently starting to cause significant weight loss.

And no, Clint was *not* aware as to how lack of sleep caused weight loss. He hadn't even known that was something it could *do*!

It also apparently turned out that Tony was one of the group of people in whom sleep deprivation strangely caused increased energy and alertness and even better mood. Clint was still confused as to how that was possible.

Still, upon learning that it was bad for Tony's health to continue as he had been, Steve had reluctantly agreed upon Bruce's solution. Tony had sighed and promised to get more sleep.

Then he broke the promise and wanted to keep moving, citing that it wasn't time for him to go to sleep, because of the different time-zones. Conveniently forgetting that the time-zones meant that it was actually *later* than the clock said, in New York and there was no point in adjusting to San Francisco time for just one day.

So Clint, after non-verbally checking with Steve, drugged Tony's coffee. And switched it to decaf.

It was more than telling that the simple switch away from caffeine and a low dose of a mild sedative (Phenergan) was enough to draw the Genius into slumber.

Tony was in dire need of sleep.

"Hate you…" He slurred, once he figured out what was going on, "Argue later…"

"I love you." Steve smiled as he tucked Tony into bed with a gentle kiss on the lips.

"I know." Tony managed to get out, even as he lost the fight with Morpheus.

"We *really* need to get him on a proper sleep schedule." Clint muttered, "That dose wouldn't have knocked out a *kid* that fast."

"I'm trying." Steve retorted.

"The problem is that *you* don't sleep all that much," Clint countered, "If he isn't creeping out after you've fallen asleep, he's waiting until you slip away and then goes back to his work."

"I don't need all that much sleep." Steve reminded, "Not since…"

“I know.” Clint shrugged, “But it doesn’t help with Tony’s sleep schedule. Could you just stay in the room? Do some drawing or something? He might not leave if you were there and awake to stop him.”

“There’s still somethings I’m trying to sort out.” Steve sighed.

“Your research project?” Clint pressed, “When are you going to let me in on that?”

“Not long.” Steve promised, “I’m really getting somewhere with it. I think I’m on the right track.”

“So not now then.” Clint quietly muttered.

“I don’t like this,” Steve murmured, “Leaving him alone.”

“He’s safe here.” Clint pointed out as they crept out the door, “It’s one of his homes. He’s got Jarvis. We’ll know if anything happens. SHIELD need us to do this.”

“I still don’t like it.” Steve countered.

“And you think I *do*?” Clint’s question was rhetorical and they both knew it.

123456789

Captain America and Hawkeye were allowed into the main living room in Pym’s home. But they were not invited to sit down.

Instead Pym glared at them from across the room.

“What does SHIELD want with me?” Pym demanded, “I quit a long time ago.”

“We were sent to find out about what happened at Pym Industries.” The Captain replied calmly.

“Ask Carson.” Pym retorted, “He was there. I was simply invited for the festivities. I was not expecting those kind of fireworks.”

“So you know nothing of the shrinking and growing powers that were touted by Cross at his preliminary demonstration of the Yellow-Jacket?” The Captain tried again.

“As far as I was aware such a feat would be impossible.” Pym replied, “I am also of the belief that giving god-like powers to everyone only leads to chaos.”

“Even though those are *exactly* the abilities of a Cold War soldier called Ant Man?” Hawkeye put in his two cents, “You still believe it to be impossible?”

“The Ant Man is just a tall tale.” Pym went back to his stock phrase.

“Yet it was your name that Howard Stark gave to the Ant Man,” The Captain pointed out, “Agent Carter as well.”

“Captain America,” Pym sighed, “Do you know *why* Stark called me that?”

“No.” The reply was blunt.

“My father is a biochemist,” Van Dyne joined the conversation, “The biology aspect of his work is often forgotten. Consumed by my father’s chemical discoveries, which have, in more recent times, often ventured into the realms of physics. As he works on sub-atomic particles and their effects on the chemical structure of compounds. However, his interest with biology has never gone away.”

“Where are you going with this fascinating lecture?” Hawkeye allowed a little sarcasm into his voice.

“My father’s particular focus in biology has always been entomology.” Van Dyne continued, seemingly oblivious of the interruption, “Insects to use the vernacular. And of all the insects there are, ants have always captivated him the most.”

“Because of an interest with ants?” The Captain raised an eyebrow in surprise, “Surely there is more behind it than that.”

“Of course.” Van Dyne smiled smugly.

A warning bell went off in Hawkeye’s brain. No one smiled like that when they didn’t already hold the upper hand. There was something going on that he was not aware of. That the Captain was not aware of. Something that was dangerous to the both of them.

He flicked his eyes between Pym and Van Dyne. He was still in the room, near a small table with a rolled up large piece of paper on it. Most likely some kind of blueprint, given what Hawkeye could see of it, despite the roll.

Van Dyne leant on the doorframe on the opposite side of the room. Clearly relaxed and in control.

Hawkeye frowned slightly, there was something slightly off. Why would Pym wear a hearing aid in only one ear?

Van Dyne's eyes flicked to the floor.

Hawkeye mimicked her and then froze.

The floor was filled with ants. They were literally swarming everywhere.

Except they were clear of Pym and Van Dyne.

"Paraponera clavata." Pym stated, "More commonly known at Bullet Ants."

"Ranked one on the Schmidt Pain Index." Van Dyne supplied, "One of those bites you and you'll know about it. Even if you have the Super Serum."

"Cap," Hawkeye murmured, "I don't have sleeves on this outfit."

"Why are you doing this?" The Captain frowned, "SHIELD isn't your enemy."

"May be not yours." Pym snorted, "But most certainly they are not my allies. I left SHIELD a long time ago. Stark and Carter both let me go. They knew I wasn't a threat to SHIELD and although they didn't approve of my resignation, they never objected to it. Nor did they try and stop it."

That was quite telling, Hawkeye thought. Why would Agent Carter and Howard Stark believe that Pym wasn't a threat?

It wasn't that Hawkeye thought that Pym was a threat. It was that he couldn't quite understand why Pym could be *considered* a threat. In order for someone not to be a threat in the manner that Pym was implying, they had to have the power to *be* a threat.

And yes, the ants were pretty scary right then… But they were just ants. Just ants.

“Leave.” Van Dyne instructed, “We don’t deal with SHIELD. Not anymore.”

“How?” The Captain looked at the floor.

A space cleared, just inside Hawkeye’s leg reach. It was large enough for him to place one foot into it.

He exchanged a glance with the Captain, who nodded easily.

It made sense. Right then, Hawkeye was the more vulnerable of the two. He had more exposed skin. He wasn’t a Super Soldier. He would be more badly injured if he got bitten.

Hawkeye stepped into the space. Then a new space cleared, again just inside his reach.

He slowly and cautiously made his way to the hall. Then the Captain was allowed to follow him.

“Tell Carson,” Pym spoke up as they went to leave, “That next time he tries to get anything of mine… I’ll do more than break his face.”

123456789

Clint and Steve sat facing each other at the table in Tony’s home. Clint was nursing a beer, while Steve nursed a lemonade.

“I have to go somewhere when we get back to New York.” Steve stated.

“Really?” Clint asked, “Why?”

“Personal project.” Steve explained.

“How long for?” Clint pressed.

“A couple of days.” Steve shrugged, “Maybe longer. But I doubt it. I just need…”

“To know that Tony’s safe.” Clint finished for him, “What if I get called on a mission?”

“Then make sure that someone’s watching out for him,” Steve instructed, “Besides Jarvis, of course.”

“Do you *have* to go away?” Clint met Steve’s eyes, “Tony would be a lot better with you there. The guy is falling to pieces from work. You at least can get him to break from it.”

“So can you.” Steve pointed out.

“Not as easily.” Clint countered, “He still… He misses you. I think he tries to bury himself more into work, because he doesn’t want to feel the ache in his heart that he gets when you’re not there.”

“I know.” Steve breathed, “God, I *know*.”

He put his head in his arms.

“God, what did Howard *do* to him?” Steve muttered, “He’ll take any semblance of love and affection. Even when it’s not from someone he should care about. But… When he doesn’t get it he thinks it’s his fault. He should have called me out on this a long time ago. Anyone else with a halfway *normal* emotional upbringing would have done so. But he thinks he doesn’t deserve it. And he substitutes it with work.”

“He used to substitute it with sex.” Clint pointed out, “So I’d say it was an improvement. It’s less destructive than that.”

“Just… I just need a few days.” Steve said, “I think I’ll have it sorted out then. Then I can give Tony the time he deserves. Which is *all* of it.”

“Hey,” Clint poked Steve in the shoulder, “Don’t put yourself down. You’re doing great. You love him. He loves you. Everything else… That’s just decoration. As long as you still love each other, then you can sort anything out.”

“I just…” Steve took a deep breath, “I feel like I’m failing him. There’s a whole *world* out there. And for some reason it’s filled with people who want him harm. Whether they want to do the harm themselves or just watch him fall. It’s… It’s not fair! He’s a great man. He deserves to be recognised for that. Why can’t people realize what a great guy he is? How far he’s willing to go for people. I mean… He *gave* a little girl a million bucks, simply because he wanted to apologise to her father. And he didn’t even really have a reason to apologise. Someone disobeyed him. He shouldn’t have to apologise for that.”

“He’s got so much *heart*,” Steve choked on the words, “And yet the Press love to vilify him. Can’t they see how much he cares?”

Clint knew that Steve didn’t really want an answer to the question. He certainly wasn’t going to tell Steve that Tony had learned a long time ago not to show his heart to the world. Too many people had taken advantage of it, after all.

Given the glimpses into Tony’s private life that Clint had managed, which he knew the profilers had never done, Clint was quite frankly *amazed* that Tony had lowered his barricades far enough to let anyone else in.

123456789

The evening after Steve left to do his investigating, Clint wandered past Tony’s workshop. He was going to try to drag the Inventor to his bed, for at least a few hours of sleep if nothing else.

However, Tony had a screen up. He appeared to be conversing with someone, though Clint couldn’t fathom what they were talking about. They were speaking in what Clint assumed was Japanese.

The other man certainly *looked* Japanese. Well, boy really. Certainly not far into his twenties, if that. Possibly only late teens.

He certainly wasn’t dressed to be talking to Stark. So Clint assumed he was talking to Tony. Dressed in a t-shirt and a baseball cap (black, some sort of logo – letters).

In the background was a lot of technology, computers and tools. So clearly some kind of scientist. Probably mechanical in nature, given the number of tools Clint could see that he actually *recognised*. There was a large circular window looking out onto a landscaped garden sort of area. But Clint could see any significant landmark features to place it.

The angle of the camera was a little odd. Aiming slightly downwards at the boy.

Clint though was more interested in watching the boy's face. There was shock and determination and slight horror and awe.

However, there was gauntness in the features. Not natural either. Despite the obvious fact that the boy was comfortably financed, he was showing signs of recent starvation.

The boy looked past Tony and spotted Clint. He pointed in Clint's direction.

Tony turned and grinned.

"Clint," Tony waved him in, "Meet Tadashi Hamada. Tadashi, this is my friend Clint Barton. I don't think he speaks Japanese, so is it okay if we switch to English?"

"That is fine." Tadashi had a slight accent, but he was understandable, "I do not understand why you want to give this job to me. There are others more qualified than me. Surely one of the Professors would be better."

"Kid," Tony closed his eyes for a moment, "They lied to me. First they didn't tell me what was going on. And then when I asked them directly they *lied* to me. I asked them what happened to Professor Callaghan. And they told me he died in the fire."

"It was a common belief." Tadashi countered.

"They told me it two days after I met Hiro-kun." Tony countered, "They lied to me. I can't trust them. I gave the money to SFIT. It's Tony money. Not Stark money. I'm sure you can understand the difference."

"Your money," Tadashi nodded, "Not your family money or business money. Why me though?"

"Because," Tony dragged a hand through his hair, "You care. I saw how your friends treated you. They missed you. They *mourned* you. And more than simply going through the motions. You are their heart. You care for people. You turned your brother away from risking his life and health bot-fighting and into school. When you were asked to make a project… You didn't build something half-heartedly. Something which would impress, but not really change anything… You build Baymax. He isn't… He's not a Master's project… He's a PhD Project, or even beyond that. Something that *should* have been far beyond your ability. But

you didn't care about that. You kept working at it until you got him *right*! No matter what it took. And it wasn't for you. It was everyone he will help. That's why it has to be you."

"I am not sure about this."

"You," Tony was firm, "All I want to know is that my money is being used ethically and morally. You've got a good heart. You care. And you'll do whatever it takes to look out for people you care for. Even run into a burning building. That's why it has to be you. I trust you."

"You do not even know me, Stark-san."

"Call me Tony. I've told you that, Dashi," Tony smiled gently, "And I don't really need to. I've seen how Hiro-kun mourned you. I've seen how you being back lit your friends up. They didn't even know you were back, but all I had to do was call them and say Hiro-kun needed you and they came. For your sake."

"He is their friend just as much as I am."

"But that is because of you." Tony countered, "They looked out for him at first, because he was *your* little brother. Then he worked his own place out in their hearts. Dashi… I need it to be you."

"Okay." Tadashi ran a hand down his face, "Okay. I will do it."

"Thanks." Tony smiled, "You've got my contacts. Any time. Day or night. I'm here. Jarvis can get me."

"What if I go wrong?" Tadashi asked, his voice quiet and nervous.

"Then you go wrong." Tony shrugged, "You realize your mistake. You fix it. We're engineers, kid. We fix things. Even if we broke them first. The important thing is that we *fix* them."

"Thank you for your trust, Tony-san." Tadashi bowed formally.

"Anytime." Tony returned the bow, "Now get some sleep or some food. Preferably both."

Tadashi simply smiled and the connection cut.

"Who's that?" Clint asked.

"Tadashi," Tony turned to face the Archer, "He's a student at SFIT."

"Where?" Clint blinked.

“San Fransokyo Institute of Technology.” Tony elaborated, “I’ve made him my Morality Checker out there. If they’re spending my money on something that isn’t ethical or moral I don’t want my money spent on it. He’s going to keep an eye on it for me.”

“And where is that?” Clint pressed.

“Japan.” Tony admitted reluctantly.

“Tony,” Clint frowned, “How did you meet him? He wasn’t already employed by you was he?”

“No.” Tony picked up a screwdriver and started work on some contraption on his desk.

“If the only places in Japan that you went were your hotel and the work site,” Clint really hoped he was wrong here, “How did you meet him?”

“I snuck out.” Tony confessed, “I had to go see SFIT. So I told Briar to cover for me with a migraine and I snuck out. I stayed in constant contact with Briar, so he knew I was safe and where I was at all times.”

“The SHIELD Agents were there for your protection!” Clint protested.

“They were suffocating me.” Tony shrugged, “They treated me like a child. They wouldn’t listen to my reasonable requests. So I ditched them. If they were as highly skilled as they were meant to be, I shouldn’t have been able to get past them. Twice.”

“Tony!” Clint dragged the name out as he sighed.

Really, he could understand where Tony was coming from. He was half minded to give Sitwell a piece of his mind. Tony shouldn’t have been able to go missing for half a day.

“How long were you out of the hotel?” Clint frowned slightly.

“Nearly the full week.” Tony replied, “There were complications. I only meant to visit SFIT. Then I ended up helping out a kid. Dashi’s little brother. He was… In a bad situation. Not dangerous bad. Just… He’s fourteen and the government were making him talk to someone who tried to kill him, without any support. I went as support. No-one had said I couldn’t. And he’s just a kid.”

“Tony,” Clint reprimanded gently, “You shouldn’t have snuck out like that.”

“I *always* visit MIT anytime I’m in Massachusetts,” Tony countered, “Oxbridge if I’m in the correct counties. CalTech in California. SFIT is not only associated with MIT with a small number of exchange students. But they also receive funding from me and can be, in

some ways, said to be more on the cutting edge of science than MIT and CalTech. I had to visit. And it was a good thing I did."

"They lied to you?" Clint remembered Tony's comment.

"They had Professor Callaghan working there," Tony explained, "One of the premier roboticists in the world. He could have commanded a high pay-check at any technology company in the world. They would have been happy to pay it. But he was much happier guiding bright young minds down their own paths. However, there was a fire at a SFIT showcase. He was reportedly killed in the explosion."

"But he wasn't." Clint could see where this was going.

"No," Tony muttered, "He *caused* it. In order to steal Hiro-kun's project. Which he then tried to use to kill another man. And destroy a *lot* of property. When I asked about him, they told me he was dead. When I pressed, they kept telling me that. Although I *knew* that he had been arrested and was in jail. They were so *desperate* to keep my money that they were willing to lie to me. So I declared I would put a morality check on how my money was being spent."

"And you chose Tadashi." Clint nodded, "What's a Baymax?"

"A robotic nurse." Tony replied, "Really clever stuff. Needs a bit of work on the confidentiality settings, but good work. According to Hiro-kun, he once diagnosed Hiro-kun with puberty."

"Given that he's fourteen," Clint considered, "That's probably pretty accurate."

"True." Tony grinned.

"By the way," Clint plucked the screwdriver out of Tony's hand, "Bed."

"I'm not fourteen." Tony reminded.

"You still need sleep."

"Who needs sleep? I have caffeine."

"Bed." Clint repeated, "Or I swear to Thor I will carry you there myself!"

Surprisingly that worked.

123456789

Hawkeye was seriously considering starting a betting pool to gamble on how long after the Fantastic Four left town before Doctor Doom turned up to attack.

It hadn't even been twenty-four hours.

And this wasn't a spur of the moment attack.

What did the Fantastic Four *do*? Send Doctor Doom intel on when they were going to be gone? Or did he tell *them* when he was going to do a big attack?

Because this was a big one.

Hawkeye would *love* to know how the Doombots had been smuggled past Customs. They seemed to be pouring out of various places. Warehouses. Parking lots. Shop store rooms.

Latveria needed stricter restrictions, in Hawkeye's opinion.

But as this was Doombots in New York, Iron Man had joined the party. And with Iron Man came the Winter Soldier.

Iron Man seemed to be mainly supporting the Falcon and Thor, while providing protection for Hawkeye's viewpoint.

The Winter Soldier was out there, somewhere. The only sign of his presence was the way that some Doombots would fall down sparking.

Hawkeye was simultaneously trying to take down the Doombots while identifying where the Winter Soldier was working from.

As far as he was concerned while Iron Man was low risk, low value, not a priority target, the Winter Soldier was a whole different story. Despite the Falcon's experience, Hawkeye was of the opinion that the Winter Soldier's relationship with Iron Man could cause the Iron Man to take up some more unsavoury habits.

If the Avengers could take the Winter Soldier out of the picture, Iron Man wouldn't pick those habits up. He'd stay a low threat. An annoyance, but nothing to worry about.

After all, Iron Man had not actually hurt Rumlow's STRIKE team. It had been the Winter Soldier. Iron Man only acting as the bait.

At least Doctor Doom didn't seem to have brought out anything innovative with this round of Doombots. They were pretty much the same as they had ever been. Fairly easy to take down, once you knew how.

The only real problems were their persistence and their numbers.

Both of which could be resolved with perseverance.

Much to Hawkeye's surprise, about halfway through the annihilation of the Doombots, he got his first ever real sighting of the Winter Soldier.

Miraculously the villain was even on the ground level, rather than in a sniper's position.

"Captain," Hawkeye was immediately on the radio, "Winter Soldier, at your seven."

It sort of said something about the Captain's opinion of the Winter Soldier than he immediately turned and launched his Shield in the direction of the villain.

The distance between the two was over a hundred meters by Hawkeye's guess. The Shield covered the distance in a matter of moments. Certainly not long enough for a normal person

to react to it.

But the Winter Soldier reacted. Though not the way that Hawkeye would have done himself.

Hawkeye wasn't ashamed to admit that if the Captain's Shield was thrown at him, at full pace, he'd duck. All the Avengers would. And by now all of the villains worth their salt would. More than a handful had taken the Shield at full pace to some part of their body.

Clearly the Winter Soldier hadn't gotten the memo. Because he went to catch the bloody Shield.

And then he fucking *caught* it. Arm straight out from his body… God, had the Captain been trying to *decapitate* the villain?

The sunlight glittered off a metal arm as the Winter Soldier lowered the Shield and very clearly eyeballed the Captain.

"Captain," Hawkeye's mouth was running on autopilot, "I hope you didn't want that back anytime soon."

Then the Winter Soldier twisted slightly and launched the Shield.

It bounced off two Doombots and rather neatly put them out of commission.

The Captain was able to catch it as it made an attempt to slam into him.

He looked up from the Shield. Shock and surprise and something Hawkeye couldn't quite define from the distance he was, displayed on the Captain's face.

But Hawkeye didn't have time to think about that. He had a battle to fight. He had to move, move, *move*. In his moment of distraction a Doombot had gotten too close.

Hawkeye fired a grapple arrow to try to slide to safety. But the Doombot cut the line while Hawkeye wasn't even halfway down it.

A hand grasped Hawkeye's back in a firm hold, before he had time to panic about his fall.

The Archer immediately knew that it was Iron Man, there was a distinctive noise from the Repulsors. He didn't flail or struggle. He knew he didn't have to worry. Iron Man wasn't going to pull the same trick he'd pulled on the Falcon on him.

There was no logic behind the knowing. It simply was. Hawkeye didn't claim to understand Iron Man's motives, but he felt he understood the man's heart.

Hawkeye's feet lightly impacted on the roof of another building. He felt Iron Man let go and turned to catch the Supervillain by the arm.

Oh, the hand could have been shrugged off easily. It was in no way, shape or form capable of stopping Iron Man. Perhaps if it had been the Captain or Thor then the grip could have, but all Hawkeye was doing was expressing his desire for Iron Man to stop for a moment.

"I owe you one." Hawkeye said firmly.

It was the first time he'd ever really acknowledged that Iron Man had saved his life when there was no need to. At least to the man himself. It was more an accepted unspoken fact.

Hawkeye couldn't even say why he acknowledged it this time.

"Be careful," Iron Man warned, "I might hold you to that and collect one of these days."

Iron Man flew off to rejoin the battle.

Hawkeye took a moment to reacquaint himself with the current situations going on below, before he started firing once again.

Chapter 46: Chapter 45

"Hey Steve," Clint bumped Steve's shoulder after the debrief, "Stop looking so down. You got your Shield back."

"That's not…" Steve tailed off.

Clint frowned. Steve was holding onto his Shield as if he expected it to just up and disappear on him.

"What is it?" Clint knew when something was wrong with his people. And something was wrong.

"There's only one person," Steve started, "Other than me, who's ever thrown my Shield. Ever even *trained* with it. Only person who could bounce it off things to get it where it needed to go. And he's dead."

"You're sure?"

"I saw him die." Steve's voice was small, "The Winter Soldier managed a three pointer to get it back to me. Him, two Doombots. I don't normally go for much beyond a four pointer. He *caught* my Shield and *used* it. Even though he could have never done so before."

"Practice?" Clint suggested, "Frisbees and replicas?"

"Doesn't work." Steve shook his head, "I've tried with those. The balance is off. The reactions are off. Vibranium doesn't act like any other material. Its properties can't be replicated. Besides it's quite a specialist skill to use. I virtually invented my style. With a bit of help and suggestions from the Commandos."

"Didn't they use it at all?"

"No," Steve was firm, "They got Howard to make them a mock-up. Tried to practice with it. After Dum-Dum got the concussion they stopped. Of course at that point Gabe had a broken nose, Jim had sprained his wrist, Frenchie had twisted his ankle and Monty had bruised ribs!"

"Not something to try at home then."

"No. The Shield… It's always been special to me. So I'm the only one that uses it. But the Winter Soldier could use it just like *that*?" Steve snapped his fingers, "He's a lot more dangerous than I thought."

"Well, we knew he was dangerous." Clint shrugged, "You've seen his records."

“About those…” Steve tailed off, before his eyes became firm, “My bunk.”

Why Steve insisted on calling his berth his bunk was beyond Clint, the Helicarrier was an odd sort of ship. But he went along with it.

Steve led the way into his quarters, Clint stopped in the doorway for a moment.

“Hell, Steve,” Clint breathed, “You had a wall of crazy last time, but this is a whole damn *room* of crazy.”

It was. What had once been a single wall of pictures and articles and files and notes had spread to take up three out of the four walls of the place.

It was a good thing that Steve hadn’t had to use the bed for a long time, as there were files scattered all over it.

The original wall had the same pieces on it, only joined by a great many others.

“This is your project, isn’t it?” Clint challenged.

“Yes.” Steve agreed, “And I think it’s time I brought you on board with what I’ve figured out.”

Clint found himself a perch on the desk, while Steve took the chair.

“Fire away.” Clint smiled.

“Here,” Steve pulled a sheet of paper off of one of his piles and handed it to Clint, “Read that.”

Clint took a moment to work his way through the document. He had never truly enjoyed reading, and despite much practice still found it difficult. However, Steve must have organised the page as it was laid out in Clint's preferred style and used bullet points, so it was easy enough to read.

It was about an assassination. The assassin had been in a hide opposite the target building for approximately three days without detection. Not moving outside of a six-foot radius during that time, else they would have been spotted. And most of that time, they must have spent on their belly, as the hide didn't exceed two foot in height. Then they'd taken the shot and left undetected. It was only when the police analysed the shot that the hide was found. Without any identifying marks left behind.

"One of the Winter Soldier's kills?" Clint asked when he finished reading.

"Yes," Steve nodded, "What is the youngest would you say someone could be in order to make that shot?"

Clint thought for a moment.

"Late-teens," Clint said, "Fifteen, I would say at the youngest. But they would have to be a very highly trained fifteen-year-old."

"Okay, try this one." Steve handed over another document.

This was about the aftermath of an assassination. This time the assassin had been detected. Then chased, after completing his mission. The route of the assassin was drawn out, with times given for how long it took him to travel the various distances. It was certainly impressive. Something that would challenge any parkour or free-running specialist.

"Fast guy isn't he?" Clint remarked.

"What's the maximum age he could be to make that run?" Steve questioned.

"Late fifties?" Clint suggested, "*Maybe* early sixties?"

"There's over fifty years between those two." Steve pointed out, "And that was the later mission."

“Wait, what?” Clint frowned.

“How much surveillance would you do for an assassination on a target during his normal routine,” Steve pressed, “Where you hit him in a location he only visits once a week?”

“At least three weeks.” Clint stated firmly, “More if I could manage it. Just to be sure.”

“Would you trust someone to do the surveillance for you?”

“No.” Clint shook his head, “Well, yes, *these* days. But when I was a solo operator, no. I’d never trust someone else. Even the employer.”

“Yet the Winter Soldier did an assassination like that, only three days after his previous one.” Steve declared.

“What are you getting at?” Clint frowned.

“What if we’ve been working on a false assumption?” Steve met Clint’s gaze firmly, “What if the Winter Soldier isn’t one man?”

“A network?” Clint breathed almost in horror.

“No,” Steve shook his head, “We’d have heard about that. What if it’s like the Sith or the Dread Pirate?”

“Master and Apprentice.” Clint realized, “It’s possible. That would certainly work. And one of those close assassinations was the Apprentice.”

“Personally, I’m hoping for the Sith method.” Steve stated.

“Why?” Clint started, “No wait, Sith Apprentices kill their Master. Dread Pirate Roberts retire.”

“Precisely,” Steve agreed, “Maybe the Winter Soldier is trying to recruit Iron Man as his Apprentice.”

“Doubtful,” Clint’s voice was cautious, “Iron Man is too… Independent to accept training from someone else. He has his own style. Why would he conform to someone else’s?”

“True.” Steve acknowledged, “But that’s my theory for the Winter Soldier. We don’t have any decent images of him to make a firm ruling one way or another. However, I would give good odds on my theory, given everything we know.”

“What about Iron Man?” Clint asked, “Because I’m sure you’ve got a theory there, too.”

“That one’s a little strange.” Steve smiled secretively, “What do you know about Iron Man’s motives? From *before* he came back?”

“Justice,” Clint responded immediately, “He was fighting for justice. Finding leverage on corrupt organisations and people. He found out about injustices and was resolving them by bringing them into the light. With proof.”

“Right,” Steve nodded, “Why is it that everyone thinks his motives have changed?”

“We’re SHIELD,” Clint snorted, “We are on the side of right. We protect people. That’s our central principle. Protecting people. Because they’re worth it.”

“I’m not saying we’re not.” Steve held both hands up defensively, “Did you hear about the Sokovia base?”

“Destroyed.” Clint stated, “But it was decommissioned years ago.”

“I know.” Steve agreed, “I went there to look at it. Strange thing though… It was inhabited recently.”

“How recently?” Clint frowned.

“Probably had people in it the day it was destroyed.” Steve declared, “I found the detritus left behind. And that was on a wall.”

A photograph was pointed out to Clint. It was pinned up over the bed. A message written in what looked to be red spray paint.

‘На King! На Кwиин! На Мажтыр!’

“Looks like a mixture of Cyrillic and Latin letters.” Clint frowned, “But as far as I can see, there’s no recognisable words in all of that.”

Yes, Clint *had* picked up Russian at one point. It was sort of necessary in order not to get killed by Natasha in the early days, when the nightmares still haunted her sleep nightly.

Clint had nightmares about Natasha having nightmares… It really said something about them.

“That’s the general consensus.” Steve agreed, “It is nonsense. But it’s also fresh. Painted about the time that the base was destroyed.”

“So?”

“What about this?” Steve pulled a picture off the wall and handed it to Clint.

It was an aerial photograph of an old army base, if Clint wasn’t mistaken. Abandoned as well, judging by the overgrown sections.

“What about it?” Clint asked.

“Notice anything odd?” Steve pressed.

“Not particularly.” Clint shrugged, “It’s just an old Army base.”

“It’s Camp Lehigh,” Steve elaborated, “It’s where I was trained.”

“And?” Clint frowned, “I doubt you’re getting nostalgic on me at this point.”

“That munitions bunker is in the wrong place,” Steve pointed, “Army regulations forbids storing munitions with five hundred yards of the barracks.”

“Really?” Clint blinked, “Didn’t know that. If it’s not munitions, what is it?”

“I didn’t know at first.” Steve declared, “I couldn’t check it out, because it was destroyed. While we were in San Francisco. But I went and looked at the rubble afterwards.”

“What did you find?” Clint waved at Steve to get to the point.

“This.” Steve located a folder and carefully removed two highly singed and crumbled and torn photographs.

However, they were still recognisable as people. One had to be Howard, Clint could see Tony in the eyes and the jawline. The other was of a woman, who was probably Peggy Carter.

“A SHIELD base.” Clint breathed.

“Yes,” Steve nodded, “I checked the records. That particular base was decommissioned in the sixties.”

“So?”

“I don’t think computers had USB ports in the sixties.” Steve held up a piece of a broken computer, the USB slot clearly visible.

“Personal computers probably weren’t even a thing back then.” Clint blinked, “How?”

“I went back to the records,” Steve explained, “It turns out that although the base was decommissioned and closed in the sixties, SHIELD has been paying the electricity bill, the telephone bill and eventually the broadband bill up until it was destroyed.”

“There wasn’t broadband in the sixties.” Clint frowned, “I don’t even think there was the internet in the sixties.”

“There wasn’t.” Steve agreed.

“So what?” Clint stared, “We’ve just been paying the bills for something that isn’t used?”

“I think the utility bills are just paid without people checking if we’re using the base.” Steve shrugged, “Might even be done by computer. I’ve checked… There’s a few bases that are officially decommissioned, that are still drawing electricity. And it’s not just a little.”

“How did you get into the records?” Clint asked.

“I’m Captain America,” Steve grinned, “People don’t ask me why I need to go somewhere. They assume I have orders.”

“How many time have you used it to your advantage?”

“More than you’d think.” Steve stated, “Anyway, I think Iron Man saw something or found out about something bad and traced it back to a SHIELD base.”

“We’re the good guys.” Clint protested.

“I know.” Steve agreed, “But I didn’t say it was SHIELD who had done it. Someone is using SHIELD bases, who’s not SHIELD. We’re paying the bills. But it’s not us living there. Working out of there.”

“But it’s a SHIELD base,” Clint realized, “You think Iron Man saw something and blames SHIELD because it came from or went back to a SHIELD base, but it wasn’t us.”

“Precisely,” Steve nodded, “And he’s looking for the evidence to prove what he saw. So that everyone can decry us.”

“But he won’t find it, because it wasn’t us.” Clint got it, “So what do we do? We can’t *prove* that we didn’t do it. He’ll just take it as a denial.”

“We need to find out what he saw,” Steve explained, “And then find the proof about who actually did it. Once we give him that proof he should stop. Or at least turn on them.”

“So basically we’ve got to Sherlock this shit?” Clint raised an eyebrow.

“Basically.” Steve nodded.

“Great.” Clint sighed, “This is going to take *forever*!”

“Maybe not.” Steve was hopeful, “We’ve got a slight advantage. Iron Man doesn’t think of the Avengers as SHIELD.”

“Think we can get him to tell us what he saw?” Clint suggested.

“It’s worth a try.” Steve shrugged, “No one’s managed to find Yinsen, I’ve checked. So we try and get close to Iron Man. And ask him to tell us what he saw. What he thinks happened. Then we can work on figuring it all out.”

“How do we do that?”

“You keep doing what you do. You got to talk to him today.”

“I am not jumping off of buildings just so I can talk to him.”

“No, no, no.” Steve shook his head, “I wasn’t asking that. But take the chances when you can. Don’t try and plant tracers on him. We want to establish some sort of trust between us.”

“You do remember the lecture I got, oh about fifteen minutes ago?” Clint pointed out, “For *not* planting a tracer on him? Ah, what the hell. Never particularly been a fan of Iron Man’s place on the top Supervillain list.”

“Agreed,” Steve sighed, “The WSC really has it in for him. And he’s only ever really hit their pockets.”

“Personally I’d like to vote for moving Doctor Doom up the list and Iron Man down.” Clint remarked.

“All the way down,” Steve commented, “Below the Wrecking Crew.”

Chapter 47: Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint was a bit surprised when he was specifically asked not to be in any SHIELD base for a few days, but he just took it like a holiday.

Steve, Thor and Sam were also included in the order, so they also relaxed. Steve managing to pry Tony out of his workshop with little trouble and instigating some alone time. Thor following the Super Soldier's lead.

Clint would have loved to do the same. Only Phil had been required during the few days. Though why Clint didn't know.

He'd find out eventually, so he wasn't too worried about that.

Instead he grabbed Sam and Darcy and started a video game marathon in Tony and Steve's lounge room, certain that they wouldn't be disturbing Steve or Tony as the master bedroom was soundproofed.

After about two days where Steve only emerged for food, the pair joined Sam and Clint.

"Finally man!" Sam grinned at them, "I was starting to suspect Stevie here had gone and killed you!"

"Nah," Tony fired back, "Though he gave it the old college try. On your left."

"What?" Sam turned back to the game just in time to see his character die from an attacker on the left, "No!"

"Saw that one coming." Darcy sniggered.

Steve and Tony had seemingly satisfied their need for alone time and so joined in with the gaming. Quickly turning the whole thing into a gaming tournament.

Bruce emerged from his lab that evening and decided to pitch in.

Thor and Jane joined them about halfway through the third day.

In some ways, Clint thought, it reminded him of before Iron Man did his whole revelations. Just a group of friends hanging out, with no obligations on them. No expectations. Just hanging and having fun. Ordering pizza and Chinese and just chilling out.

He missed those days. Packing as much as they could into as short a time as possible, because at any moment the phone could ring and they'd be off again.

But even with that pressure it didn't matter. Because they were having fun.

And Tony was relaxed. The bags under his eyes had virtually vanished. He wasn't drinking coffee.

Which Clint hadn't actually thought was possible. There had been many jokes about too much blood in Tony's coffee system over the years.

When they got tired, they switched to a movie.

Phil and Tasha slipped in about halfway through Pirates of the Caribbean Three (Do *not* ask Clint for the actual names, he could never keep them straight).

Clint saw a business card fall out of Phil's pocket.

It was unusual for something to fall out of Phil's pockets. Certainly nothing that could compromise security.

But Clint could see that Phil was exhausted. Worn out and most likely hadn't slept for most, if not all, his time away from Clint.

Darcy picked up the card, before Tasha could field it, and frowned at it.

"Scorpion?" Darcy frowned, "Bit of an odd name for a company."

"Oh God," Tony dramatically flopped an arm over his eyes, "You had business with the Cyclone? Someone get the man a drink. He needs one."

"Where did you get cyclone from?" Jane was confused.

"It's a company run by Walter O'Brien." Tony shrugged, "A company of geniuses. Genii? Never mind. It's a small company. About four people. Anyway, he states that it's a Cyclone of Scorpions. You know, like a Pride of Lions. A School of Fish. A Parliament of Owls. That's always been my favourite."

"I've never heard of that one." Steve blinked.

"Pretty sure he made it up." Tony returned, "He's more than a tad arrogant."

"This coming from you?" Clint teased.

"How intelligent is he, Brother Stark?" Thor kept his volume down for once.

"Depends," Tony sighed, "He claims to have the fourth highest IQ ever recorded. Higher than Einstein."

"One hundred and ninety-seven." Jane put in, "I've heard about him. Really intelligent."

"Smarter than you, Tony?" Sam grinned.

"High IQs do not automatically translate to smart." Tony replied easily, "Otherwise Scorpion would be bigger than it is. Rivalling SI in the marketplace. Instead they operate out of a half-dilapidated old warehouse, which I'm pretty sure Walter lives in."

"But he has an IQ higher than you?" Sam pressed.

"I don't know." Tony countered, "Besides it's only a claim."

"What do you mean?" Jane was confused, "It's well known."

“What isn’t as well known,” Tony sighed, “Is that he’s only ever sat one IQ test in his life. At primary school. He didn’t keep the documentation. There is no record of the results apart from his word. No one else can even corroborate his story. Not even his teachers.”

“Wait,” Darcy jolted up, “You’re calling him a liar?”

“I’m saying there’s no proof.” Tony shrugged, “He’s got a really intelligent team. But they’ve… They’ve got all of Reed Richard’s faults and worst traits. With none of his redeeming features. They’re intelligent. Not always smart.”

“There’s a difference?” Sam blinked.

“A big one.” Tony nodded, “That group would forget to pay the electricity bill, because they got into some interesting maths.”

“So would you.” Steve reminded.

“No,” Tony shook his head, “I set up my finances so that the money is taken automatically so I don’t have to think about it. That’s *smarts*. Not intelligence. Anyway, where’s Agent’s drink?”

“You really think he needs one?” Darcy snorted, “The Suit’s fine.”

“I wouldn’t turn it down.” Phil muttered.

“Of *course* he needs one.” Tony waved his hands expansively, “The EQ of Scorpion doesn’t even add up to what a normal person has.”

“EQ?” Clint frowned.

“Emotional Quotient.” Darcy supplied, “EQ is generally deemed a more reliable indicator of success than IQ. It’s all about how you deal with emotions, yours and other peoples’. Are they that bad?”

“That group would inform a person who had just lost their much beloved dog to old age,” Tony sighed, “That it was old and therefore bound to die soon anyway.”

“They can’t be that bad.” Darcy countered.

“They are.” Tasha and Phil chorused.

“Trust me,” Tasha muttered, “They look normal. But they’re not. Get close enough and the cracks show. Huge gaping holes in their ability to interact with people.”

“You’ve dealt with them too?” Tony sighed, “You poor thing.”

Tony had given up and gone to the bar. He poured three drinks and masterfully managed to bring them back to the group, without spilling a drop. Tasha gratefully received the vodka.

Phil received the bourbon with gratefulness in his eyes.

Steve claimed the scotch off Tony and downed it in one.

"Hey!" Tony protested.

But the protest was more show than function. Clint couldn't even remember the last time he'd seen Tony actually drink any alcohol.

"So what's yours, Tony?" Darcy asked.

"What's my what?" Tony frowned.

"Your IQ." Darcy pressed, "Where do you rank?"

"I don't know." Tony shrugged.

"Can't remember, huh?" Bruce teased, "Do we need to ask Pepper?"

"No." Tony shook his head, "I mean I don't know. No one knows. I've never had an IQ test."

"What?" Clint blurted out, "Those things are virtually *everywhere*! Schools use them to place pupils."

"And Starks have a great deal of money." Tony countered, "Howard instructed that I wasn't to take an IQ test. Had it written into the contracts he had with my schools and with MIT. There were huge penalties for breaking it. And huge rewards for keeping it. Carrot and stick. Never let it be said that Howard didn't know how to use both."

"Why?" Jane put in, "You'd be in the top percentile, certainly."

"He didn't believe that intelligence could be measured in that way." Tony stated, "Didn't believe it was quantifiable in that manner. As I got older… I just never elected to take one. What's the point? I already know I'm smart."

"Aren't you even curious?" Darcy asked.

"No." Tony shook his head, "It doesn't matter to me. Why *should* my IQ matter? To anyone?"

Clint didn't really have an answer for that one. Nor did anyone else really.

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"What were you using them for?" Clint asked Phil, later in private.

"Nobody can find Yinsen," Phil replied, "Or his family. It was suggested that Scorpion could figure out where his base is located. Or his next target."

"Basically anything useful." Clint snorted.

"Basically." Phil agreed.

"Could they?" Clint was curious.

"No," Phil shook his head, "They kept linking Iron Man back to Tony. Suggesting that Yinsen is hiding in this very building."

"We'd notice." Clint fired back immediately, "And Tony wouldn't keep Yinsen from us. I think it actually pains him sometimes that he can't properly thank Yinsen for what he did for him."

"Hence all the scholarships and donations in Yinsen's name." Phil agreed, "No. They couldn't find him or predict him. Nor could Professor Epps."

"Professor? Of what?"

"Maths."

"Maths?"

"He's had a great deal of success when it comes to resolving crimes. And even predicting them to some degree. We called him in a couple of months ago. He can't locate or predict. But he did say that there *is* a common factor to the SHIELD bases hit. He's certain of it. He just doesn't know what. We're missing something."

"Steve has a theory." Clint offered softly.

"I've heard it." Phil nodded, "It's possible, but I'm keeping it quiet for now. Asked Sitwell to investigate further. *Discretely*. Meanwhile I've been asked to look into the destruction of Camp Lehigh."

"I've heard about that." Clint nodded, "What's the problem?"

"Initial report is that the explosive came from inside the base." Phil shrugged, "But Fury noticed that the blast pattern was wrong. The explosive most likely was some kind of

missile."

"How did an old missile go off?" Clint frowned, "What was it even doing there?"

"It wasn't old." Phil shook his head, "The explosive was modern. And it landed there. One of the last missiles that SI ever produced. And only ever sold to the US military."

"What about the under the table deals?" Clint asked.

"I need to check into those." Phil agreed, "But the feeling is that many have been used. If not all of them."

"Then how?" Clint was confused.

"Precisely the problem." Phil stated.

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Time continued normally for a while. Clint smiled as he noticed that Tony was spending less time in his workshop. It was clear that the genius was trying to spend more time with his husband. Clearly the one-on-one time that Steve had managed to sort had kindled a desire in Tony to do the same.

Okay, so Tony was still spending more than the usual nine to five in his workshop. But he had at least reduced it down from his Steve and Bruce enforced five to eleven (and no, Clint did not mean only six hours).

However, even with all the wonderful domesticity that was going on, crime still continued.

Though Iron Man was laying low for a while. So that was at least one less thing to worry about. He'd been laying low since the Doctor Doom incident.

One theory going around was that Iron Man was planning a bigger and better attack. That he was preparing for an attack on a more heavily armed base, rather than his usual abandoned or low-staffed bases.

Quite honestly Clint didn't care. There were plenty more villains out there to deal with.

Peter, in particular, was having trouble with the constantly popping up villains. Clint couldn't even classify most of them as Supervillains.

Not that they expected Iron Man to stay low for too long.

So when Iron Man reappeared no one was really surprised.

However, his location was a surprise.

One of the DC storage warehouses… Well, really the storage *district*. There were a lot of files and old defunct projects to be stored. And a lot of fake files. Just to bulk it all out.

Of course the place was guarded. Though most of the protection was in its anonymity, there were some security guards. Far more highly trained than their appearance and title suggested. Mostly former STRIKE Agents.

But they weren't prepared for Iron Man.

Hawkeye turned up ahead of the others. Mostly due to his being on a date with Coulson at the time. Lola was faster than most people would think. Especially when the "special" features were activated.

It was a sight.

Clearly this was something that Iron Man had been planning for a while. He wasn't alone.

Yet it wasn't the Winter Soldier.

Instead it was multiple versions of himself. Bigger. Larger. Bulkier. Gun metal grey in colour. More visibly armed than even War Machine. Even the faces were different. No even slightly comforting eyes, but a single vertical white light. Much like Cyclops' visor, only running top to bottom.

They looked… Not human… Not slightly reassuring… Not even…

They looked soulless.

And while Hawkeye had never attributed the Doombots to have had *souls*. They had clearly been *things*. These Ironbots… They weren't things in the same way.

Soulless was the only way Hawkeye could describe what was wrong about them.

Quite honestly, Hawkeye felt slightly intimidated by them.

There were about twenty or so of them. Nothing like the numbers that Doctor Doom used when he released his Doombots.

But it was enough. They were attacking with such ferocity that Hawkeye was surprised that there were any structures left.

Whatever had happened to make Iron Man target SHIELD had obviously infuriated him. And that anger had finally peaked.

All Hawkeye could be glad about was that at least that rage was happening somewhere where there would be virtually no civilian casualties, if any. And where there wasn't a lot of value to be destroyed.

Hawkeye quickly found himself as much of a vantage point as he could and opened fire. He doubted that his arrows could really do anything, just like Coulson's bullets would be pretty

useless. However, he hoped that they could be distracting. Buy enough time for the rest of the Avengers to turn up.

The Black Widow appeared not long later, in a Quinjet. With her was both Falcon and Banner.

Not that Banner would be any use in the battle. The Hulk still refused to fight Iron Man, though he had gotten closer to the Avengers, so it was unlikely that he would fight them to protect "Tin Man"

Thor was back in Asgard again. Apparently it was something to do with an ex-girlfriend causing trouble. Hawkeye did not want to think about that. If Thor's *brother*, adopted though he was, could cause the trouble he'd cause…

What could an ex-girlfriend with a grudge do?

"Where's the Captain?" Hawkeye asked.

"Coming." The Black Widow responded.

"War Machine's enroute too." The Falcon put in, "But he's coming from that Graduation thing in Colorado Springs."

"He'll be here as soon as he can." Banner agreed, "Both of them will."

With the further back up the team started work. Though most of what they were doing was mainly rescue work. Get the security guards out of danger and tend to their wounds.

Using the Quinjet as a weapon was pointless, as all of the weaponised versions in New York were currently undergoing maintenance.

Rather convenient, Hawkeye thought. But nothing he could do about it. Except talk Coulson into providing a rather strongly worded report about it.

And *nobody* wanted a strongly worded report from Coulson. Not even Fury.

"Incoming," The Captain declared after a few terse minutes, "Sorry for the delay."

"What kept you?" The Falcon snapped.

"I was having dinner." The Captain responded, "Quite looking forward to desert too."

"Did *not* need to know that." Hawkeye fired back, "Is he alright?"

"I waited until his car arrived." The Captain was calm, "But I was more delayed by my slight detour."

"Where did you go?" Banner asked.

"I popped over to the DC Office," The Captain was definitely smirking, "Got us an armed Quinjet. Coulson, Black Widow, it's yours. I'll take the ground."

Well, it made sense. Both Coulson and the Black Widow's guns were basically useless against the Ironbots. And the Captain could most likely do some damage with his Shield; deflecting the bullets and missiles and Repulsor beams back.

The transfer was quick. The Captain was soon in the field and causing damage.

The Quinjet was making some progress. But the Ironbots were tougher than Doombots.

Banner was hanging back as normal. Checking the security guards over and tending to them medically. Even though he wasn't "that sort" of doctor, he was better than ninty percent of doctors in Hawkeye's mind.

Suddenly a blast from one of the Ironbots landed only a metre from Banner.

"Hulk smash Flying Monkeys!" The Hulk roared as he dove into the fray.

Hawkeye blinked. Clearly the Hulk did not view the Ironbots as his “Tin Man”. They were helpfully not exempt from the Smash every enemy rule.

“We need a way to take them down quickly.” The Captain muttered as he moved to protect the security guards.

“The Blitzkrieg Button.” One of them muttered.

“What?” The Captain asked.

“The Blitzkrieg Button,” He repeated, “One of Howard Stark’s old inventions. It causes a complete power outage in a two kilometre radius. It’s inside.”

“How do you know about it?” Hawkeye demanded.

“My old boss,” The guard shrugged, “He was Jack Thompson. Part of the old SSR. He told me about it once. Said that Director Carter had gotten hold of it. Put it where no-one could get hold of it. So it couldn’t be used. It’s inside. Should take them down.”

“For how long?” The Captain demanded.

“Indefinitely?” There was a shrug, “That was the problem with the Blitzkrieg. It couldn’t be reversed. Fries the wiring or something. Sure we’ll lose two Quinjets. But…”

“We’ll stop this.” The Captain nodded, “Where is it? What does it look like?”

“It’s a grey metal orb with a button.” The guard stated, “Old Jack didn’t like Director Carter’s method of just popping it in a random box. So he had it moved to the safe in the security office. It’s in a hidden compartment. No one’s opened the compartment for years. If not decades.”

“How do I open it?” The Captain frowned.

“Twist the handle clockwise by one hundred and eighty. Push inwards for a count of three. Then pull out.”

“Got it.” The Captain nodded, “No code for the safe?”

“You won’t need it.”

“Hawkeye,” The Captain started giving orders, “You keep them safe. Black Widow, Coulson, I’m heading in. Give me a distraction. Falcon, cover my back. And Hulk… Smash.”

The Captain charged towards the building. The firing from the Ironbots was mainly directed towards the Quinjet, as the Black Widow lashed out with the weapons fiercely.

Hawkeye kept an eye on everything, climbing a tree for a better vantage point.

He saw the Captain enter the building, through a destroyed wall. One of the Ironbots spotted him and soared in after him.

Hawkeye wasn't too worried though. It was only one. And in an enclosed space the Captain would have an advantage. Iron Man very rarely engaged in close quarters combat for a reason. He'd been caught out by the Captain a few times early on. Credit to the Supervillain, he'd learned not to close distance, unless it was a sudden attack, with a swift retreat or a grab and drag over several large heavy items. Not that he'd ever done that on any of the Avengers before, but Hawkeye remembered seeing it happen on the footage from the few times STRIKE teams had dealt with the Supervillain.

Plus the Ironbots moved slower than Iron Man himself. Probably due to the extra weight, which also affected War Machine. So there was that advantage as well.

Checking in on Falcon allowed Hawkeye to spot a missile launched from one of the Ironbots. Initially he wasn't too worried. It was a clear miss.

Only the Ironbot wasn't aiming at the Falcon. Nor was he aiming at the Quinjet or even Hawkeye himself.

"Captain!" Hawkeye yelled, "Incoming!"

The explosion rocked the ground.

The Ironbot, which had been inside, flew out, moments before a second explosion engulfed the building in fire.

Hawkeye was down from his tree and halfway towards the building before his brain re-engaged.

His throat was sore, but he could not remember yelling.

The flames were dying down. The result of fire-suppressants, but he could not recall who had used them.

He reached back to add his own to the flames. Intent on getting it out quicker. But there were none left in his quiver. Yet he didn't remember using any.

Peripherally Hawkeye was aware of the Ironbots retreating. But he wasn't worried about them.

Peripherally Hawkeye was aware of War Machine's voice on the comms and the sound of his guns as he literally cut an Ironbot in half with bullets. But that wasn't his concern right then.

He had to get through the flames. He *had* to.

The bright red of a nearby fire extinguisher caught his eye. He grabbed it and fought the flames as best he could with it. They weren't designed to fight large blazes. Only small ones, providing people with a chance to escape from a larger one.

But he had to *try*.

Suddenly there was a loud noise and the flames were extinguished.

The fire extinguisher dropped from his fingers. Hawkeye charged into the ruins.

Then he staggered to a halt. He fell to his knees next to dark blue and a grey star and grey stripes.

Red, white and blue; his questing hands found what he was looking for. He pulled it close and looked down at it.

The metal was dirty. He couldn't see his reflection in it.

His fingers tried to clean the smoke and muck off it. But only succeeded in smearing it around.

"Hawkeye, what…" The Falcon's voice fell silent as he took in the scene.

A hesitant hand was extended by the Falcon, to check for the pulse.

Hawkeye hadn't bothered. No-one could survive that. Not in that many pieces. Not with that much damage. Not even someone with the Serum.

"Flying Monkeys hurt Star Man." The Hulk growled.

A drop of water fell on the Shield, following the natural curve it washed away some of the dirt.

A second, third and fourth drop quickly joined it.

"Why is it raining?" Hawkeye asked.

"It isn't raining." Coulson squeezed Hawkeye's shoulder.

"Of course it is." Hawkeye replied, still looking at the Shield, "But it's not due to rain today. Why is it raining?"

“That’s not rain, our Beldin.” The Black Widow murmured, “That’s not rain.”

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me. You all knew this was coming.

Chapter 48: Chapter 47

Beldin, it was a strange nickname. But one that Natasha only ever used for Clint when it was the darkest of dark days.

Turning the Shield over in his hands, Clint knew it was that time. This was one of the darkest days he had ever known.

The day he lost something he couldn't replace. And this time, it was never coming back.

It wasn't the same as losing Phil. As bad as that had been. It had been more guilt than grief.

But this?

This was grief. All encompassing grief. Because he knew there was nothing he could have done. Nothing *anyone* could have done.

They were sitting in the debriefing room on board the Helicarrier.

"What do we tell Tony?" Rhodey asked.

"The truth." Clint declared.

Everyone turned to stare at him.

"We tell Tony," Clint continued, "That Steve was working. That he had responded to an attack on a warehouse we had been hired to protect. That it was under attack from Iron Man. And we tell him that Iron Man killed Steve."

“It would solve many of our problems.” Natasha agreed, “The plan is workable. And it is the truth.”

“Look,” Sam ran a hand through his hair, “Technically I’m about to breach confidentiality with you, but Tony? While he’s never come out and actually *said* it… He respects Iron Man. I wouldn’t say he *approves* of Iron Man’s *methods*. But he approves of the morality behind it. The desire to fight injustice. Tony’s going to be rocking enough from the fact that Steve’s dead. That? That could push him over the edge.”

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, “I get that. But if we don’t… What happens when Yinsen comes and approaches Tony? What happens when he tries to get Tony involved in this vendetta against SHIELD? What happens when Tony can’t say no to him? This… This’ll give Tony a reason not to side with Yinsen. As you know he would right now. Because he owes Yinsen his life.”

“You think Yinsen would approach Tony?” Phil asked.

“I would.” Bruce chimed in, “If I was hunted by a government agency and was a vigilante running from everyone… And I needed help to complete my mission? I’d go to Tony. Particularly as he designed the miniature Arc Reactor in the first place.”

“And most of the Helicarrier.” Clint agreed, “No, Yinsen will go to Tony. When he runs out of options. He will go to Tony.”

“Then we make sure he runs out of options.” Natasha declared, “We hound him until he has no choice but to turn to Tony. And then we get him. He will pay for this.”

“We *will* avenge Steve.” Clint’s voice was cold.

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But his heart felt like ice when he approached Tony.

Tony was, for once, out of his workshop. Slumped on the couch in front of the TV. Dressed in what were most likely sleeping clothes. He was nursing a cup of what smelt like hot chocolate. Clint could even see the marshmallows in the top.

It looked like Tony was settling down for a rare period of relaxation, simply waiting for his husband to come home.

Clint knew that the scene in front of him was something that most people would expect to see at night. But given Tony's often erratic schedule (particularly when no-one was around to enforce the normal times of day to do things) it could be any time of the day.

Such as in this case eight o'clock in the morning.

"Hey guys!" Tony chirped cheerily, "Steve behind you? Only I'm about to start his favourite episode. He *really* doesn't like missing the start. And I don't feel like rewinding it."

"Tony," Clint took a step forward, "Steve…"

"He's coming, right?" Tony frowned, "He left to go on that emergency call out. Said it was local-ish. You were there, right Clint? The two of you are usually partners on these sorts of things."

"Steve's not coming back." Clint to talk around the lump in his throat.

"Of course he is," Tony grinned, "He always comes back. He promised."

"Not this time." Clint whispered.

"Which hospital is he in?" Tony rose to his feet, "If he's hurt that bad…"

"Iron Man killed him." Natasha cut to the chase.

"No," Tony's face was ashen, but his voice was still firm, "No! You're lying. That's not possible. That's not… Jarvis, locate Steve. This is just some kind of joke."

"Sir, Master Steve is not in the Tower. Should I extend the search?" Jarvis inquired.

"Iron Man killed Steve." Natasha reiterated.

"No." Tony shook his head firmly, "You're lying. She's lying isn't she, Clint? Sam? Brucie-bear?"

Clint could see the tears forming in the corners of Tony's eyes. He couldn't watch it anymore.

Clint moved forward quickly. Raised his hands to Tony's shoulders and pulled the man into a hug.

"I'm sorry." Clint whispered, "I'm so sorry, Tony. She's not lying."

“Steve can’t be dead.” Tony murmured into Clint’s shoulder, “He promised. He promised he would always come home.”

“I’m sorry.” Clint hauled Tony back down onto the sofa, “I’m so sorry.”

Clint could feel the tears on his neck. Tony was clearly distraught.

But at least he was past the denial stage.

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“Master Clint,” Jarvis’ voice jerked him awake in the middle of the night, “Are you available?”

“What?” Clint rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he sat up in bed, “Jarvis? What’s going on?”

“I believe Sir is undertaking risks that would be deemed unsuitable,” Jarvis stated, “As you are the nearest designated emergency contact, I am contacting you.”

“What?” Clint blinked as he swung his legs out of the bed.

“It is my protocol in such situations.”

“I didn’t know you had such a protocol.”

“Officially I do not, Master Clint,” Jarvis sounded strangely bashful (could a computer even *be* bashful?), “However my usual protocol in such situations is no longer valid.”

“What was the protocol?”

“To contact Master Steve.” Jarvis replied immediately, “No matter where or when it occurred. However…”

“It is no longer useful.” Clint whispered, “So I’m the next best thing.”

“Master Steve once stated that he trusted you with everything,” Jarvis declared, “That he knew you would look after Tony, no matter what.”

“Yeah,” Clint nodded, “I’ll look after Tony. What’s going on?”

"Master Thor returned from Asgard," Jarvis explained, "He knew about Master Steve's demise and decided to engage Sir in an Asgardian custom of remembrance."

"Shit!" Clint rose to his feet.

Tony wasn't really in a fit state to deal with Thor's over-exuberance right then. It was only seven days since Steve… Since Steve.

And Tony still wasn't on steady ground. He still seemed to be in shock. He'd worked through the denial very quickly, but now was almost blank. No emotions showing through.

Clint was waiting for the anger. He was pretty sure it was going to be epic.

As was the scene that greeted him.

Thor's custom clearly involved alcohol. Lots and *lots* of alcohol.

Though precisely what Thor had consumed and what Tony had consumed, Clint couldn't be sure. The empty bottles were scattered pretty much everywhere and the stench of alcohol hung like a visible mist in the air.

Clint opened his mouth to shout, but then closed it again as he saw the pair.

Thor was stretched out on the couch, like some Roman God reclining during a feast. Tony lay in front of him, using Thor's chest as a pillow. His eyes at half-mast, closer to sleep than Clint had seen since… Since they'd broken the news to Tony.

The Genius had been practically mainlining caffeine and hiding in his workshop since then. Clint wasn't convinced that he'd been getting any sleep, but had been unable to force the issue, as he and everyone else had been unable to get into the workshop. Even the ventilation had been a no-go area.

And while sacrificing Tony's hard won teetotal state was a high price to pay, the damage was already done, so it would be better to just let the grieving widower sleep it off.

Once he finally dropped into slumber.

Thor's hand was entangled in Tony's hair, gently stroking and lulling him deeper towards slumber.

"You know," Tony's voice was heavily slurred, "All the best people I know die. Uncle Jacq. Uncle Dum-Dum. Jarvis. Yinsen. Steve."

Tony raised his glass in salute.

"Yinsen?" Clint sank down to his knees in front of the pair, "You told me he was with his family."

"Yep!" Tony raised his glass with a slightly unsteady hand in a salute, "They're dead too. He never told me, till it was too late."

"What dost thou mean, Heart-Child?" Thor pressed gently.

"I had a plan." Tony's voice was soft, "I had a plan. We were going to get out. Together. We were going to both get out. He had a plan too. He was going to die getting me out. He never told me about his plan. He never told me about his family. He always planned on dying as I escaped. He wanted to die. All I could do was watch him as he went. He gave his life for me. And I never asked him to. He just did it. He told me not to waste my life. Then he died. They killed him. But I made them pay. I made them all pay. Yinsen… The man who had nothing and everything."

Tony raised his glass in salute once again.

"To nothing and everything." Tony's voice broke slightly, "Nothing and everything."

Clint caught the glass as it fell from Tony's lack grip. Tony *finally* drifting into slumber, albeit alcohol induced.

"He hurts deeply." Thor observed, his fingers not ceasing their gentle motions.

"Yes," Clint sighed, "But he can't do this again."

"Of what do you speak?" Thor frowned.

"This," Clint waved his hand at all the bottles, "This wasn't good for him."

"Dost thou not have the Symbel?" Thor pressed, "The ritual drinking?"

"We have wakes," Clint shrugged, "A celebration of a person's life. A commemoration of their deeds. But… Tony's an Alcoholic."

"Alcoholic?" Thor was confused.

"When someone drinks too much on a regular basis."

"There is no such thing as too much," Thor smiled indulgently, "Only one who cannot hold their drink as well as others."

"Maybe on Asgard," Clint countered, "But here? Alcohol is a poison to us. Small amounts… That's not going to do any harm. But over a long period of time or even a large amount at once… It can kill."

"Forsooth?" Thor breathed, "I had not known. However, I have not observed our Tony drink alcohol before. Therefore, he is safe."

"No," Clint shook his head, "Tony used to drink. A lot. He was what we call a Functional Alcoholic. Which means he could drink a great deal without it visibly effecting him. Thus putting him at greater risk of poisoning. He gave up drinking a while back. So he has managed to undo some of the damage he did to himself by his excessive drinking. But alcohol is also like a drug. He can quite easily slip back into old habits."

"He could return to his ways of drinking in excess?" Thor suggested, "Thus causing further damage to himself?"

"Yes." Clint agreed.

"Given his emotions at the moment," Thor pondered, "Would he not be at greater risk, given that I have known many to drink to drown their sorrows?"

"Yes." Clint sighed, "I should have gotten rid of the alcohol before now. But I just didn't think of it."

“Do not blame thyself,” Thor instructed, “You are also suffering a great loss. Our Steve’s passing does not just affect our Heart-Child.”

“Why do you call him that?” Clint frowned, “You’ve never used that before.”

“When I return to Asgard,” Thor shifted slightly, into a position probably more comfortable for Tony to sleep, “I regale my fellow Warriors with tales of our exploits. Often mentioning our Tony in the regaling. I am often called upon to retell these tales at banquets. Thus many of Asgard have heard of our exploits. My mother has started to call our Tony our Heart-Child. As he is the Heart we centre around.”

“True enough.” Clint agreed, “Look, Phil’s not getting back till tomorrow. Some work thing. I think I’ll crash here. That alright with you?”

“Verily.” Thor intoned.

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Ten days.

Ten days between life and a hole in the ground.

It had taken ten days before Steve could be buried.

Standing at the podium, Tony looked horribly washed out in his black suit. His face ashen. His eyes sunken.

At least… At least the bags were hidden by the make-up, which Tony had skilfully applied.

They weren’t as bad as they could have been. Thor had refused to let Tony retreat to his workshop alone after the drunken night. Apparently too scared that Tony might sink back into the alcoholic retreat that the Asgardian had unintentionally opened up. So the Asgardian had forced Tony to actually get a decent amount of rest.

But three nights of rest, could not make up for nearly a week of lost sleep. Particularly when Clint wasn't completely convinced that Tony was *actually* sleeping during the night-time hours.

"Steve…" Tony's voice faltered, "Steve was one of the two best men I ever knew. I was lucky to have him in my life. I was never worthy of him. It… Wasn't supposed to be this way."

Tony refused to let the tears in his eyes fall as he turned and walked away from the podium. His shoulders hunched and his movements laboured.

Clint stood as close to Tony as he dared. The tears in Tony's eyes refused to fall, even as he watched the coffin lowered into the ground. Tony had already laid three roses on it, one red, one white and one so bright a yellow as to be almost gold.

As Tony moved towards the cars, Clint was right beside him.

The camera flashes and the persistent questions of the Press virtually engulfed them as they reached the cars.

"Get back!" A black clad man snapped at the Press, "Brat's not answering any questions. Back off!"

The man was clearly security. He got between Tony and the Press. Clearly forcing them back, protecting Tony.

Tony barely registered the man. He just moved and trusted that the man would look after him.

"I *said*, back *off*!"

Clint kept close to Tony, he couldn't run the risk of Iron Man trying to move close to Tony. Nor could he, in good conscious, leave Tony without a supportive shoulder, should anything happen.

"Do I need to use violence here, people?"

Tony needed protection and support. Clint would provide both of them, until the Genius was ready to stand on his own two feet again.

"Which word are you having trouble with? The back? Or the off?"

Tony slid into the car, with Clint right behind him.

"Look, do you *like* getting punched or something?"

The security man slipped into the front of the car and started driving off in near perfect silence.

"It's too quiet." Tony muttered.

The driver turned on the media system. The music that came out wasn't what Clint knew Tony preferred. It wasn't even Clint's preferred style. It was soft classical.

But Tony didn't object. He simply stared out the window.

Clint reached out to touch Tony's hand, but stopped short. Steve's words from all that time ago came back to him.

“If he doesn’t see the touch coming, he flinches. And sometimes he goes somewhere inside his head.”

Clint didn’t want to send Tony to that place inside his head. So he just froze.

The car wasn’t one of Tony’s largest or flashiest. It wasn’t the most expensive car in Tony’s collection. However, it was elegant. It had class being a Bentley.

Clint knew that Tony could have used a car large enough for all the Avengers to sit inside with him. The fact that he hadn’t showed it was a conscious decision. He hadn’t wanted everyone there. Yet he had allowed Clint to join him.

Clint kept an eye out for following vehicles as the car wound its way through the streets of New York. But no-one seemed to be interested in them, though that could be because the driver was using a rather round-about route back to the Tower.

Chapter 49: Chapter 48

When they pulled into the Tower's garage, it was via a little known back entrance leading to Tony's private garage. The driver parked the car amongst all the others there, clearly knowing precisely where it was meant to go.

The driver got out and quickly moved round to Tony's door. Clint was expecting the door to be opened and the driver to quietly stand to one side as they left to go to the Reception.

Instead the driver opened the door and sank down onto one knee, looking up towards Tony's frozen features.

"Hey," The driver smiled gently, "It's okay."

"No," Tony shook his head, "It's not. This is all…"

"This is *not* your fault." The driver was firm, "This never was and never will be your fault. You are not to blame. You are not responsible."

"But I *am*!" Tony protested.

"Hey!" The driver cut across, "No, you are not. This wasn't your fault. You know who to blame."

"Yeah," Tony sighed, "I know."

The driver's gloved hands rose to Tony's face. The few tears that had begun to fall from Tony's eyes were gently wiped away.

"The snow glows white on the mountain tonight," The driver spokes softly, "Not a foot print to be seen."

"A kingdom of isolation." Tony put in.

"And it looks like we're the Kings." The driver's smile was gentle.

"The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside." Tony muttered, "Couldn't keep it in."

“Heaven knows you tried.” The driver countered.

“Don’t let them in,” Tony continued, “Don’t let them see.”

“Be the good boy you always have to be.” The driver agreed, “Conceal. Don’t feel. Don’t let them know.”

“Well, now they know.” Tony sighed, a hefty dose of resignation in his voice.

“Now they know.” The driver nodded, “Where to, Brat?”

“I don’t…” Tony tailed off, “I can’t…”

“Bed?” The driver suggested.

“Prefer the workshop.” Tony shrugged.

“Not today.” The driver laughed, “You’d hurt yourself. Too emotional. And don’t tell me you aren’t. Get some sleep and start tomorrow.”

The driver rose and took a step back, Tony went to follow, but stumbled.

“When was the last time you got some decent sleep?” The driver asked frowning.

“With or without alcoholic assistance?” Tony retorted.

“I’ll take that as too long.” The driver sighed, “Come on, Brat. Bed time.”

With that the driver turned around and squatted down slightly. Tony didn’t seem surprised as he climbed on for a piggyback ride.

Clint watched as the driver made his way to the elevator.

“Jarvis,” The driver didn’t even look upwards, a clear sign he was used to Jarvis, “Expressway please.”

“Of course, Master Jimmy.”

That ran alarm bells in Clint's mind. Jarvis was very particular about who rated a Master. It'd taken Clint a while to spot it. But Jarvis only referred to people who had spent considerable amount of time with Tony as Master. And *only* if they had been accepted as family by Tony. And then there was the unquantifiable test that meant that Pepper still ranked as Miss Potts, yet Darcy and Jane had quite quickly become Ladies. When questioned why, Tony had said Jarvis didn't like the connotations of Mistress.

Which asked *so* many questions. Yet no one had dared ask them.

Clint tried to keep pace with Jimmy and Tony, but the man moved very quickly for someone who was carrying someone else. Also the shock of Jarvis' announcement had thrown Clint's off-balance for just long enough for Jimmy to get in and the door to close, before Clint caught up.

As he dashed into the next lift and hit the top floor button, Clint whipped out his phone.

"Hogan," Clint snapped as it was answered, "I need info about Jimmy. The driver."

"Jimmy?" Hogan sounded confused for a moment, "James Stevens. Good guy. The Boss hired him bit after the Battle of New York. Just turned up one day and said that he was hired. Loyal. Would take a bullet for the Boss if needed and still drive the car to get away from the attackers."

"Why'd Tony hire him?"

"Never got the details. Like I said, he just turned up. Actually I was glad. Despite the Boss agreeing that we needed Security for SI. He's been highly resistant about personal security. But Jimmy just bulldozes those complaints. Insists that he acts as bodyguard where it's necessary. Even gone behind the Boss' back on occasions."

"I thought that was your job."

"The Boss asked me to work security on Pepper instead. Said he wanted to be sure that she was safe. Ever since the Lobby Incident. I don't know if he's yet figured out that we're dating."

"Not sure here either." Clint blinked; it was news to him.

"Jimmy stepped up. He's been the Boss' chauffeur and body-guard ever since. Even done a few hand-to-hand sessions just in case. Of course he started all of this after the Hawaii Trip."

“And Tony doesn’t object?”

“Not in my hearing.”

“Thanks.” Clint hung up.

Dashing out the lift, he found Jimmy and Tony in the main bedroom. Jimmy had apparently put Tony on the bed and was in the process of removing Tony’s shoes.

“Can you get his belt and tie?” Jimmy asked, “He’s damn near asleep.”

True enough, Tony barely stirred as Clint removed the aforementioned clothing. Tony’s jacket had already been removed and Jimmy pulled off Tony’s socks as well, before covering the sleeping Genius with the bedcovers.

The still awake pair slipped quietly out the room, shutting the door firmly behind them.

“Jarvis,” Jimmy addressed the AI, “Lockdown the workshop until eight… Thirty… AM… Tomorrow… New York time.”

“Of course, Master Jimmy. May I presume that you will also be getting some much needed respite in the mean time?”

“I will.” Jimmy sighed, “Mother hen.”

“I must correct you, Master Jimmy, I am not a female domesticated fowl.” Jarvis’ voice almost seemed to have amusement in his tone.

Was that even possible?

“Listen,” Clint got in Jimmy’s face, “That’s one of my best friends in there. My little brother. And he’s *just* lost his husband. I am *not* going to let you swan in here and get him on the rebound or *whatever*!”

“What?” Jimmy’s surprise was genuine, “Look… That’s not my angle. That man in there? I owe him my soul. Not my life. My *soul*! He saved me. I owe him everything. And I’ll do whatever it takes to pay him back. He’s a brother to me. Not a lover. He just lost his

Sun, his Moon and his Stars. I'll stand by him for as long as it takes for him to get back to steady ground."

Clint narrowed his eyes slightly as he took a long, proper look at Jimmy. Medium to light brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. It would probably reach his shoulders and a tad beyond that when down. Clear blue eyes were firm and steady. A bit sharp, and a look in them that made the man seem older than his mid-twenties appearance. It was a look Clint recognised, he saw it in the mirror far too often. The man had seen combat.

The rest of him was pretty ordinary. Average height and build, and fairly ordinary in features. Not someone with a distinctive scar or facial feature. He was a man who could disappear quite easily on the streets of New York or any Caucasian city.

His voice had a Brooklyn twang that was slightly reminiscent of Steve, though. Even if Steve's only came out in moments of high emotion.

The only distinctive features about his clothing were the gloves. A pair of white gloves. They were in keeping with the style of the outfit. But none of the other security personnel had *ever* worn gloves.

"I won't have him numbing the pain at the expense of his liver, either." Jimmy continued, "Not like you lot let him. I get that Thor is hard to say no to. But get a *grip*! The Brat doesn't need that sort of thing right now."

"And I suppose he needs you?" Clint fired back, "You who let him go waltzing off around Japan without a care in the world!"

"Hey!" Jimmy was indignant, "He doesn't like being confined. If he puts the limits on himself, then it's okay. But putting those limits on him? He was going stir-crazy. I kept in constant communication with him. I knew where he was at all times. And anyway, those guards, if they were any good they'd have spotted him sneaking out or in. Or they would have checked the suite. God! For all they knew I was a traitor, that there was a gun pointed at Tony's head or even mine. But they just took my word for it. After the fourth day, I wasn't even lying to them. They just asked if he could leave yet, and I said no. So they shrugged and left. I wasn't even ordering food enough for both of us."

Clint paused. Jimmy hadn't said anything that he hadn't thought himself. The Agents *should* have done better. The only reason he'd never said anything was that he hadn't wanted Tony

interrogated. And besides, no harm had happened.

"What's up with the gloves?" Clint asked.

"Chauffeurs wear gloves."

"Not all of them." Clint countered, "And those that do wear hats too."

"I get horrible hat hair." Jimmy grinned.

Clint stared at him.

"Not buying it?" Jimmy sighed, "Look… I had an accident. Long time ago. My hand… It's not pretty. Most people can't bear to look at it. So I cover it up. One glove looks… Weird. So I wear two… The Brat… He's the only person I've ever known who didn't look at me differently because of my hand. So I don't take my gloves off. Not if I can help it. Only with him. On his own. Because he doesn't fear it."

"How come you can put his workshop into lockdown?"

"Generally if Jarvis calls you Master, you can." Jimmy shrugged, "Not saying the Brat can't get past the lockdown. He can override it easily. *But* he has to override it. So he stops and thinks. It won't stop him every time. But it makes him think twice."

Clint blinked at that. It wasn't something he'd ever thought seriously about. Oh, there had been jokes about putting the workshop on lockdown. But no-one had ever considered trying it.

It seemed that Jimmy was more willing to try something. Rather than just talk about it.

"And the Disney song?"

"Disney Princess songs are a bit of a thing between the two of us." Jimmy replied quickly, "You should hear his rendition of Mulan's Reflection. He's actually a very good singer. Look, I'm not trying to take Steve's place. I never could. I never would. I'm just going to look after him, for as long as I can. I am his to my dying breath and beyond. To the end of the line."

Jimmy turned and walked decisively away. He entered the lift and left the floor without looking back.

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Clint gave Tony until eleven the next day before he decided to extract the Genius from the workshop. If nothing else, Tony could probably use a snack.

Bruce had instigated a regular feeding schedule for Tony. Part of his method of making sure Tony was kept in good health, even if he was emotionally unstable.

Surprisingly the workshop wasn't blacked out. It had been most of the time recently. Whether because Tony was working on something classified or he was curled up in a corner crying, they didn't know. But they couldn't get in.

The holographic screens were up and running. Different views and camera angles of the Ironbots… Or rather Irondroids as the SHIELD techs had classified them.

"Jarvis are you getting anywhere in the sims?" Tony demanded.

"Apologies Sir," Jarvis replied, "Currently all parameters have an unacceptable level of risk to reward."

"Keep trying." Tony snapped, "There *has* to be a better way to deal with this. Damn it!"

Tony pulled his hand away from where he was working on something currently unidentifiable. But it was clearly hot, since Tony had just been welding it.

Clint grabbed Tony's wrist and pulled him over to the sink.

“Don’t fight!” Clint barked, “You’ll hurt yourself. I’m helping!”

“Sorry,” Tony sighed, relaxing, “There’s… There’s just not enough time.”

“Hey!” Clint tapped Tony’s cheek, as he held the burn under the running water, “There’s all the time you need. You take all the time you need. It doesn’t matter how long anything takes. You grieve for as long as you need to grieve. Don’t rush yourself. Don’t push yourself. Don’t hurt yourself. I’m here for you. Just like you were there for me. Okay? I’m in your corner one thousand percent.”

“It’s…” Tony turned his face away, “Different.”

“What?” Clint blinked.

“It’s different, okay?” Tony repeated, “Just… There were things about our relationship you weren’t aware of. Things I don’t want to talk about. Things I’m only just realizing the implications of *now*. And I can’t talk to you about them.”

“Why not?” Clint asked, “I’d never judge.”

“I just… I just can’t.” Tony stated, finally managing to pull his wrist away from Clint.

“And you can with Jimmy?” Clint wasn’t exactly trying to hide the anger in his voice at the security guard’s name.

“Jimmy?” Tony frowned.

“I believe Master Clint is referring to Master Jimmy, Sir.” Jarvis helpfully supplied, “The gentleman you refer to as Briar.”

“Oh, Briar.” Tony sighed, “No… I couldn’t talk to Briar about this either. Or Sam. It’s… It’s just something I need to work out for myself, okay?”

“Alright,” Clint nodded gently, “But I’m here when you need me.”

“I know.” Tony agreed.

Clint wandered back to the door.

“I made blueberry muffins.” Clint announced.

Tony’s head jerked up to look at him, from where he’d settled back down to work.

“Well, don’t just stand there, you skinny boy in suits,” Clint smirked, “They ain’t coming to you down here.”

“Doctor Who.” Tony murmured as he left his work.

“Hey,” Clint gently bumped Tony’s shoulder, “You said it was good.”

Chapter 50: Chapter 49

Hawkeye surveyed the battlefield. Okay, so it was only the warehouse district of New York, near the harbour, but it had become the battlefield by the inclusion of the large robot currently trying to make its way into New York proper.

The Avengers were managing to hold it back to some degree. But it was only a matter of time before it overcame their efforts.

The problem, as Hawkeye saw it, was that it didn't seem to have any weak points. Every part of it seemed protected and the metal was resilient enough that Thor and the Hulk weren't managing to make a significant impact.

They were also disorganised. The robot seemed to be broadcasting some sort of blocker to their comm units. Thus interfering with their co-ordination.

Hawkeye was starting to suspect magic was involved. In which case things were going from bad to worse. And they *really* needed to get a magic user on their team sometime soon.

Suddenly a hand grabbed the back of his armour.

"Better clench up, Legolas." The familiar voice hit him with an almost physical blow.

Before he could do anything he was up in the air.

"Let me go!" Hawkeye demanded.

"I'm not going to drop you." Iron Man stated.

"Put. Me. Down!" Hawkeye hissed.

“No.” Iron Man countered, “Look, we need to stop this guy. I know how to do it. But I can’t. I don’t have the equipment. You do. But don’t know how. It needs both of us to do this. So will you *listen* for just one moment?”

Hawkeye stilled. He wasn’t particularly keen on the idea of dropping to the ground. And for some reason no-one apart the Hulk seemed to realize he was out of position.

The Hulk had simply grinned at him. So there wasn’t going to be any help from that particular quarter for some time.

“Talk.” Hawkeye snapped, “Quickly.”

“There’s three weak points,” Iron Man explained, “A simultaneous explosion at all three points will solve the problem. My exploding rounds are either too big to get into the right places or can’t be timed that way.”

“My arrows can.” Hawkeye nodded, “Why should I trust you?”

“Because you owe me one.” Iron Man replied softly, “And I warned you I would collect.”

“That was before you killed the Captain.” Hawkeye’s voice was cold.

Iron Man paused. His flight jerking suddenly for a moment.

“And right now,” Iron Man’s voice was quiet, “The rest of your team is in danger. What have you to lose? If you don’t listen to me, you won’t be able to stop it. You know that.”

“Fine!” Hawkeye drew an arrow, “Where?”

“Shots the dots.” Iron Man instructed, before lighting up three small targets.

Three arrows and then three simultaneous explosions and the robot fell.

Hawkeye prepared himself to be lowered to the ground.

However, the grip on his armour tightened instead. Then the world started speeding past him.

Hawkeye tried to keep track of where they were going, but Iron Man made turns and kept the speed up so high that Hawkeye was finding it hard to see, the wind in his face was making his eyes water.

Yet he still noticed when the light vanished, indicating that they were in a tunnel of some kind. From the twists and turns, most likely a subway tunnel. Returning into the light, they went up a fair way.

Then there was solid ground beneath his feet and the grip on his armour was released.

He spun and aimed at Iron Man.

The Supervillain had retreated about two metres, holding his hands up at chest level. The palms turned in towards his chest. For most it would be a strange position to be in. However, given the fact that Iron Man's palms were weapons in themselves it was almost a surrender. And with feet grounded on the floor, Iron Man wasn't trying to attack.

"I just wish to talk." Iron Man stated, "In private. This was the best I could arrange."

"And why should I listen?" Hawkeye retorted, "You killed the Captain."

"No!" Iron Man's body posture radiated frustration, "No! No, I didn't."

"The Irondroids killed him. They are yours."

"No, they aren't." Iron Man sagged slightly, "I had nothing to do with that. I have no interest in that warehouse. I got what I wanted out of there months ago. No one even noticed."

"They use *your* tech."

"I know." Iron Man almost sighed, "I have an alibi. Not that anyone would believe it in six months of Sundays."

"What is it?"

“I said you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me.”

“When the Capt… At the time of… From a bit before the Captain joined the battle I was with the Winter Soldier. Plotting the kidnap of Captain America.”

“What?!” Hawkeye jerked, nearly releasing his arrow, “Why?”

“Every plan we had,” Iron Man cocked his head to one side, “Every *single* plan we came up with, when we started working together… It all relied on one thing. Captain America. We needed him alive. He was the last piece of our puzzle. We needed him alive. He’s no good to us dead.”

“Why?” Hawkeye narrowed his gaze, “Why did you need him alive?”

“Because he is an honest man in a dishonest world.” The reply was quick.

Suddenly a large thud distracted the pair. They turned to see the Hulk standing on the rooftop with them. Clearly he had been looking for them.

“Flying Monkeys hurt Star Man.” The Hulk declared.

“I know Big Guy.” Iron Man responded, “I know.”

“Flying Monkeys take Star Man away.” The Hulk continued.

“I know.” There was an odd sort of catch in Iron Man’s voice. Something that didn’t translate well through the computerised vocaliser.

“Hurt Shiny Heart.” The Hulk added, “Make Shiny Heart sad.”

“I know.” Iron Man didn’t seem to have much else to say.

“Make Tin Man sad.” The Hulk moved forward and pulled Iron Man into a full body hug. Even lifting the armoured man off the ground.

Then he put the Supervillain down and backed off.

“Hulk smash Flying Monkeys.” The Hulk was firm.

“Thanks, Big Guy,” Iron Man nodded, “Appreciate it. Piece of advice for you, Hawkeye.”

“What will it cost?”

“This one’s for free.” Iron Man stated, “Watch your step. There’s snakes in the grass. Hiding in the eagles’ shadow.”

“What are you?” Hawkeye frowned, “You’re all over the map. Helping and hurting depending on the day of the week. What are you? A Black King? A White Knight?”

“If you have to ask,” Iron Man replied, “You’re on the wrong side.”

He launched upwards and left Hawkeye behind, just watching the red and gold disappear into the clouds. The tension that had earlier been in his bow was gone. He wasn’t going to fire. Though he didn’t know precisely why.

123456789

Seventy hours of the same questions over and over again, was enough to make any man crazy, Barton reflected as he leaned back in the chair.

SHIELD wasn’t happy with him. It was the second time he’d let Iron Man go without doing anything. The first since the Captain died. Yet Barton didn’t feel guilty really.

There had been too much honesty in Iron Man’s words. Okay, so the tone was hard to detect due to the computer program used. But the body language had told a fair bit, despite the Armour. As had the word *choices*. Iron Man couldn’t say the words “Killed” or “Dead”. Had deliberately avoided them. Now that could have been a ploy, but Barton’s gut said it wasn’t. And he trusted his gut. It had gotten him out of more situations than he cared to remember.

So something was wrong. If Iron Man wasn’t behind the Irondroids, who was? And why?

Why use something that would be so clearly identified as someone else’s work? Most Supervillains were egotistical they *wanted* to be known for their work. Plagiarising someone else would be completely anathema to them. Framing someone wasn’t their style. At least not another villain.

So who and why?

Barton had kept a lot of the conversation between himself and Iron Man private. What did it matter if Iron Man said his plans needed the Captain alive because he was an honest man? What did it matter about the whole “White Knight/Black King” thing?

And the whole thing about snakes and grass and eagles? Not important.

At least not to anyone in SHIELD.

Okay, so that was a lie. Barton was rattled by it. He knew it was important. That there was a threat somewhere. But he didn’t know where. And until he knew *where* then he was going to keep silent about it.

Because the most logical way to deal with someone who knew too much was to make sure that they couldn’t convince anyone else. Whether by killing them or discrediting them.

Killing Barton would just make certain people suspicious that he’d had something important to say (Coulson and Romanoff). It would also be difficult. Though not impossible.

A sudden death so soon to him saying something mysterious like Iron Man had? Oh no, people would think twice about it being an accident. No matter how carefully arranged.

So Barton knew he would be discredited. It wouldn’t take much. He was still on thin ice from the whole Loki Incident. Add in the two incidents with Iron Man and he could be quite easily declared a liability or mind controlled or even insane.

They’d lock him up. And Barton never wanted to be locked up again. He wouldn’t last. And he knew it.

He also knew he was lucky. If it had been Romanoff interrogating him, she would have known he was hiding something. If it had been Coulson… Well, he wouldn't have hidden anything.

He knew that he was going to fill Coulson in, as soon as possible. But he wanted things kept off the record. The fewer people that knew the better in Barton's eyes.

"I don't know." Barton responded to the interrogator. It was quickly become his stock phrase.

"Why did he chose you?"

"I don't know."

"Why is he denying to have killed Captain America?"

"I don't know."

"Why didn't the Hulk attack him?"

"I don't know."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"I don't know." Barton shrugged, "I just didn't. Didn't even think of it. Besides, I don't think the Hulk would have taken it well."

"Why not?"

"I don't know!" Barton snapped, "No one knows. Banner doesn't know. And he's the other half. For some reason the Hulk likes Iron Man. And he won't say. Last time I asked he actually *sang* the word "Secret" at me with a smug grin on his face. So I don't think he's going to say any time soon. Are you done with these questions? I don't know."

"Where is Yinsen?"

"Dead and gone." Barton retorted, "I reported that three days before the funeral. You should know that by now."

"Are you certain?"

"Given that Tony was toasting him and saying that every decent person he knew was dead… I'd say so. Even said Yinsen died in his arms."

"You reported he was with his family."

"And they were already dead. Dead from when Tony was first captured. I reported all of this. Read your damn reports. I'm out of here."

Really, if they wanted to keep him in one place they shouldn't have left him in a room with a ventilation shaft. He was up and into it in moments.

It slightly frustrated him that he couldn't really go anywhere. He was on the Helicarrier. It wasn't like he could just leave. And after his not-so-dramatic walk out of interrogation they would be watching the planes.

Instead he burrowed his way to the storage areas of the Helicarrier. He knew one of them contained all of Steve's stuff. Phil had said they'd moved them there almost immediately after he died.

Maybe he could dig something out of that lot for Tony. Surely there was a sketchbook that didn't have anything classified in it. It would probably mean a great deal to Tony.

As Clint approached the area where he thought that the stuff had been put, he heard a beep.

He froze. What was it? Some sort of security system? Something dangerous? Someone walking past? A mobile phone?

What was it?

It came again. Just a single beep. Mechanical. Somewhat familiar. He'd heard that noise before. But louder.

Slowly he crawled forward. He had to know what that beep was. Something told him that if he didn't he would regret it.

So he stopped and paused regularly waiting for the beep to help him know which direction to go.

Eventually he found himself looking out of a vent into what he *thought* was a storage room. But there was a hospital bed. Why was there a hospital bed in a storage room? Why put a patient in a storage room when there was a virtually empty medical bay only a few floors up?

Clint couldn't quite see the person's face, but he was too curious to leave. He slid out and landed lightly on his feet.

With a better angle he could see the face of the person in the bed. He froze.

Moving on silent feet he came closer drawing a blade. He had to be sure. He couldn't trust his eyes.

For possibly only the second time in his life he couldn't trust his eyes.

This could just be a Life-Model-Decoy.

A couple of moments later, after using the blade to investigate the hairline and his phone to study the fingerprints, he sank to the floor, visibly shaking.

It was real. No LMD. Clint knew all the most sure fire ways to check and the patient had just passed the test.

Sliding the blade away, Clint managed to rise to his feet. He looked around the room. Taking in all the boxes and stuff shoved into the space. Moving towards them, he opened one of the boxes and took in the contents.

He was surprised, but not surprised. Really the contents made sense, given everything else that had just hit Clint.

He picked up the medical chart at the end of the bed. Reading through it, he tried to make sense of the technical jargon. But only ended up confused, even *with* using the internet to translate the words that literally made no sense.

He opened the door to check where he was in the Helicarrier. Okay, so he shouldn't have been able to open the door as it had been locked. But he could pick the lock easily and did so.

His phone rang. Glancing at the name, he answered it.

"Hey Phil." His voice was soft.

"Where are you, Clint?" Phil asked, "You left the debrief."

"More like an interrogation." Clint responded, "I'm down in the storage area. Room 6–150–4–A."

"Come back up." Phil instructed.

"No," Clint shook his head, even though Phil couldn't see him, "You come down. I've got something to show you."

"Fine." Phil sighed.

It took Phil about fifteen minutes to join Clint.

"Hey Phil," Clint greeted him with a grin, "I've found someone with a bigger obsession with Captain America than you. Look, they even collected the Original!"

Chapter 51: Chapter 50

Phil stumbled as he took in the sight. Steve lay on the hospital bed, perfectly still. Only a single drip going into his body.

"No." Phil shook his head, "He can't be."

"Fingerprints match." Clint countered, "And he's not a LMD. I don't know how. But it's Steve."

"That's impossible." Phil frowned, "You saw him die."

"I saw someone dead dressed in his uniform." Clint retorted, "I think I saw precisely what I was *meant* to see. I couldn't make out a face there was so much damage. I don't think I even tried. I mean there's no point in look for a pulse when the body is in *that* many pieces. And the uniform was identification enough. They fooled me. They fooled all of us."

"Why?"

"I don't know. What am I going to tell the others? *God*, what do I tell *Tony*? Sorry, I screwed up?"

"Any clues as to who set this place up?"

"No. I've looked where I can. But I wasn't sure who to trust. You're the only person I've called. And I wasn't leaving Steve. Someone might make him disappear again."

"How did they get him?"

"I don't know. But…"

"What?"

"There was an Irondroid in the warehouse with him at the time of the explosion. What if it wasn't a fighting droid, but a transport one? It opened, dumped the body and captured the Captain. Time it right and he'd be still rattled from the blast."

"Then how did he turn up here?"

"I didn't tell anyone this, but Iron Man declared he'd never kill the Captain, because he's an honest man. That is to say the *Captain* is an honest man. He also told me to watch my back. Seemed to think I was in danger."

"You didn't say anything, because?"

“Well, I think this is a pretty good sign that something hinky is going on. There is no *way* that Iron Man managed to kidnap the Captain, sneak in here and hide him. Even *without* all this stuff shoved in here as well. This is stuff from his berth. I recognise it. Only thing that’s not here… Is the Shield. And we both know where that’s *meant* to be.”

“Meant?”

“Are we sure it’s still in the Vault? Because I’m pretty sure a lot of this stuff should be there as well.”

“I will check. I will also inform Fury of this.”

“If he doesn’t know, he’s going to be Furious.”

“How many times have you made that joke now?”

“I stopped counting… I’m staying here, by the way. *Someone* has to make sure that Steve doesn’t go walkabout. And is it safe to unplug the IV line?”

“Yes.” Phil declared after a quick inspection, “It is just something designed to keep him out for the count.”

“So they’ve kept him here, by keeping him drugged up.” Clint sighed, “I hope it wears off quick.”

Phil calmly walked out the door. Clint locked it behind Phil and perched on the bed next to Steve.

“What shall I do to pass the time?” Clint wondered out loud.

He wandered over to the boxes and started rummaging through them. After a bit of searching he managed to locate a Starkpad and a sketchpad.

Settling down in the chair next to Steve’s bed, Clint activated the Starkpad.

“Let’s see what you’ve got on here.” Clint muttered, “Work. Work. Work. Doodles. Oh, you found paint. And I think I’d better stay away from anymore of *those* doodles. Oh, the entire run of Leverage. I’ve got the time.”

Clint leaned back in the chair and started off with episode one.

123456789

There was something niggling at the back of his brain when the third episode had finished. Something that just wasn't going away. Something bugging him. Something about the characters.

"Okay, let's see if anything here can help… Oh, character profiles. That'll do. And they're videos, sweet!"

After watching those, bits and pieces were coming together in Clint's brain.

"Iron Man is a *major* fan of this series. Some of his stuff is lifted straight out of the text. And his whole ethos is… It's along the same lines. What if… What if you were right Cap?… No… What if *Iron Man* was right? You're here and you're not meant to be. What if there *is* a hidden side to SHIELD? They can't just be using our old bases, else they'd have never managed to get you here. Or that whole thing was a set up by Fury, but why would he do that? Persuasion to get Tony to make weapons again? I mean, he's not happy with Iron Man right now. I found him trying to find a way to take down the Irondroids. But I don't see Tony selling those weapons. Nor would he give them away… I don't know. Even if there *is* a hidden side to SHIELD, why would they stash you here? Right under Fury's nose. Unless he's involved. But I don't see him being involved. He's too crooked to be involved. I know that sounds weird. But Fury's *The* Spy, as Tony would say. He wouldn't be involved in a hidden side to SHIELD. If there *was* a hidden side, you'd have been hidden *better*. Like Project Insight… Which I know absolutely nothing about, whatsoever… Except that it's hidden in the basement of DC. And it's Fury's pet project."

There was a light tapping on the door.

"Clint, it's me." Phil's voice came through.

Clint opened the door, letting Phil in.

“Fury’s spitting blood.” Coulson declared, “You’re on overwatch, Agent Barton.”

“He didn’t know.”

“He didn’t know.” Coulson nodded, “What is the matter?”

“You ever have something resting just there on the tip of your tongue?” Barton breathed, “It’s like I’m about two steps away from figuring something out. But I don’t know what it is.”

“You’ve seen something.”

“Yes. But I can’t quite get *what*.”

“Give it time. You always see it in the end. We’re on split shifts.”

“Who else?”

“Until further notice, just the two of us.”

“Not the rest of the Avengers?”

“Fury doesn’t want anyone to realize that we know. So until we get a lead, just the two of us. Besides, someone will need to change out the bag eventually.”

“I’m on first shift.” Barton declared, “You need a pallet?”

“No.” Coulson shook his head, “I brought what we need.”

Barton had spotted the two bags, but hadn’t paid it much attention. Really he should have expected something like that. Though he was especially pleased when Coulson handed him the other bag, inside which was his bow and quiver, along with a change of uniform.

Okay, so he didn’t really need to change uniforms. But it *would* smell better. Which was probably why Coulson had also included a bunch of baby-wipes and dry shampoo. It was quite clear as to what Coulson had down as priority. Particularly given that Barton hadn’t been given time to shower or change before his whole interrogation had started. A quick clean-up was definitely on the schedule.

123456789

Another seventy-two hours and ten episodes later, Barton was starting to get antsy.

No-one had come. Judging from the IV bag and rate, Steve would have needed it changed every day.

Yet, Steve still hadn't woken up. Though he had started to twitch about four hours ago, giving the impression that he'd be coming round soon.

Barton's twitchiness wasn't helped by the fact that he *still* hadn't figured out what was bugging him. It was only getting worse. He could almost *feel* it getting closer and closer to the surface. But it wasn't surfacing.

"Tony." The word was barely a whisper as it escaped Steve's lips.

"He's okay." Barton reassured, "He's got Sam, Rhodey, Bruce, Thor, Jane and Darcy watching out for him. Don't worry about him. You concentrate on getting better. Okay?"

Steve settled back down. Seeming to settle into a natural sleep.

"That's good." Coulson nodded, "Give him a few hours and he should be back to normal. Based on his previous rates of recovery."

"But no-one's come to deal with him." Barton sighed, "This is a bust. Somehow, someone knew that we found out. Keeping their identity secret is more important than keeping Steve a prisoner."

"Or they believe it doesn't matter." Coulson countered, "That they can reclaim the Captain at a later date."

"Okay, that's more worrying." Barton muttered.

He was flipping through Steve's sketchpad. It seemed to be a pretty even mix of Tony and Iron Man. Actually really good Iron Man fanart if Barton was being honest. There was an extremely good picture of Iron Man looking slightly upwards at Tony with Hawkeye, the Black Widow and the Captain arrayed behind Tony.

It almost looked like Iron Man was flirting with Tony. The Black Widow was looking strangely hopeful and slightly sheepish. Hawkeye seemed to be watching the scene with something akin to caution in his eyes. While the Captain looked oddly disreputable and a touch confused. Tony, in the centre, seemed to be in the process of being persuaded towards something, if the look in his eyes could be believed.

Barton really thought the picture ought to be framed and hanging in some gallery, it was that good.

But it was making the thought that he couldn't *quite* grasp become more prominent. Part of his brain had figured something out. But wasn't telling the *rest* of his brain.

123456789

"Fury wants you to collect the Shield from the labs." Coulson instructed about four hours later, "Rogers will want it when he wakes up."

"Sure." Barton stood up, "I could do with stretching my legs anyway. Will you be alright here?"

"I've got it." Coulson was firm, "Go."

"If he wakes up before I get back," Barton had one hand on the doorknob, "Tell him Tony's okay. But doesn't know yet. I think it'll be easier to explain to Tony that Steve's alive when we can actually shove the two of them together. Like he did with us."

"Will do." Coulson nodded.

Wandering back up through the maze of corridors, Barton was calm. Steve was in the best hands possible right then.

The scientists were reluctant to give up the Shield, but with Fury's authority, it wasn't as if they could really argue. Though one tried, giving a vehement speech about the scarcity of Vibranium and how the study of it could change the world.

Barton tuned him out after the first sentence. He wasn't going to change his mind. And neither was Fury, which was the more important part of the sentence.

Shield securely placed on his back, Barton started back through the maze.

Suddenly the whole structure shook and shifted to one side. Barton had to move his feet quickly in order to avoid being thrown off his feet.

An alert started blaring out, complete with flashing lights.

"We are under attack. All personnel report to their emergency stations. This is not a drill. Report to your emergency station. Iron Man is attacking the Helicarrier."

Chapter 52: Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a moment Barton froze.

"Why would he do that?" He breathed, "Why would Iron Man do such a… A *suicidal* act?"

Suddenly it hit Clint – Barton – Hawkeye, whoever he was, at that moment. All three aspects of his life saw the truth.

The little detail that his brain had been trying to tell him for so long. It crystalized into being right there.

It was so simple. And yet, so complicated.

But it was only a theory. He couldn't *prove* it was true. There was so much circumstantial evidence to support it. But it was only circumstantial.

However, he knew how to prove it. He activated the Avengers private channel.

"Hawkeye to Coulson," And he *was* Hawkeye right then, "Do you still have the Collectors' Edition preserved?"

"Yes." Coulson's voice was terse.

"Get it dressed."

"What?"

"Get it dressed. Get it up to the top deck."

"Are you crazy?"

"No. You trust me to never miss. Well, I'm not missing right now. Do as I say."

Hawkeye's feet flew over the floor as he wove his way to the top deck… To the flight deck. He could hear and feel the shocks of the attacks as he went.

He paused as he came to the door leading out to the flight deck. He swung the Shield round onto his arm. His left arm. He didn't want any misapprehensions from Iron Man. He knew with the Shield hampering his left arm he couldn't draw his bow. He basically couldn't fight at full ability.

It was the closest thing he could do to going out there unarmed. And he wasn't going to do that.

Just in case he was wrong.

He could hear the constant communication of the various STRIKE teams fighting on the deck over his comm unit. Hopelessly outmatched, but still trying all the same.

"Coulson," He switched back to the private Avengers channel, "What's your ETA?"

"Twenty minutes."

"I'll stall as long as I can."

Taking a deep breath, he stepped out onto the deck, making sure that the Shield was visible.

Walking across the deck, he refused to flinch at the shots travelling all around him. If he was right, he wouldn't be hurt.

God, he hoped he wasn't right. But deep down… In his heart… He knew it all made sense.

"I know you can hear me." He called out.

There was no response.

"I know you can." He tried again, "And I know why you're doing this."

This time there was a response. A Repulsor blast, not landing close enough to cause damage, but certainly close enough to intimidate. But he refused to react.

"I know." Once more he spoke, "I get it. And I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry! I'm sorry that we drove you to this. I'm sorry that we lied to you. And above all…"

He lowered the Shield, so that he had both hands on top, keeping it positioned upright on the deck.

"I'm sorry that Captain America is dead."

Iron Man's full attention seemed to be focused on Hawkeye. The blasts of the STRIKE team were being ignored. But they weren't getting through the shielding, so it wasn't as if they were any real threat.

"We lied to you. *God*, how we lied to you. But we're the same like that. We value honesty above nearly everything else. *Because* we know lies so well. It was all you heard as a child… You were taught to lie before anything else. Because that was all you heard. You were told lies over and over and over again. Until you learned that that was what people do. They lie. And so you lied. You lied with your words, with your voice, with your mouth, with your face and with your whole body.

"Just like me. I never meant to lie. I didn't think of it as a lie. It just wasn't the truth. Not the whole truth. I thought it was better that way. I forgot that lies of omission are still lies. And they hurt just as much. I thought I was protecting… I didn't realize I was harming. I'm sorry. I'm so, so *sorry*. But I see it now. I see what I was lying to myself about. I was so

wrapped up in my own lies that I didn't see through them to the truth. Somewhere along the way, amongst all the lies, I forgot the truth.

"But you didn't. You just didn't know about all the lies. And we had everyone lying to you. And lies became your truth. Until you discovered them. When was that? After the battle, I know. But was it before the funeral?"

There was no response from Iron Man.

"We never meant to harm you. You realize that right? All the lies… They were meant as protection. We didn't realize the harm we were doing. And I am so, so *sorry*."

"Hawkeye!" Rumlow's voice cut across the deck, "What are you *doing*?"

The STRIKE team stopped their firing. They were clearly confused as to the situation.

"I don't understand what has driven you to do this." Hawkeye kept his eyes on Iron Man, "Only that it is our fault. We are the ones to blame. We drove you to this. Talk to me. We can sort this all out."

"Hawkeye," Rumlow was firm, "Disengage. Now!"

"You can't hurt me." Hawkeye ignored him, "Just like I can't hurt you. You know that."

Iron Man finally acted. He lowered himself down to the surface of the Helicarrier. Walking towards Hawkeye, before stopping, only just out of touching reach.

"It's okay," Hawkeye smiled, "I know it's not your fault. You were pushed to this. Not just by us. But by everyone. We failed you. It was our fault. If we had just… If we had just trusted more, this would never have happened. It wouldn't have gotten this far."

"He's compromised!" The cry came only moments before the single shot.

It wasn't aimed at Iron Man. But instead at Hawkeye.

However, it never landed.

Iron Man shifted his position to bock Hawkeye from the shot.

"See?" Hawkeye closed his eyes for a moment, "You can't hurt me. And you can't *let* me get harmed. I'm right. I didn't want to be. But I'm right. And since I'm right… I know you have a reason for all of this. I may not know the actual *reason*. But I know you have one. And I know it's a good one. It has to be. Else you wouldn't be doing this. You're too good of a man to do any of this without a reason. Even if what I thought I knew was a lie… Which I know it isn't… You've shown us what a good man you are. Did you know that Thor called you a Valiant Warrior after New York? He said you didn't have the heart of a villain. He was right. I bet you couldn't even have actually hurt the Falcon when you kidnapped him. It was all just bluff."

Iron Man stayed still and had no visible reaction.

"Talk to me." Hawkeye pleaded, "Please. I can't do anything to help. Unless I know who I am fighting, I can't *help* you."

"Hawkeye," Coulson's voice came over the comms, "I cannot gain access to the flight deck. STRIKE teams are not allowing anyone topsides."

Hawkeye tensed. He *needed* Coulson. This whole situation could be defused with the Captain's presence. But Iron Man wouldn't take his word for it. Not after all the lies.

Even if his suspicion was correct, he couldn't tell the truth. Iron Man was desperate enough that it might push him over the edge. And Hawkeye couldn't allow that to happen. He was quite literally holding Iron Man back from suicide with his very presence, he knew that for a fact.

The Helicarrier shuddered underneath their feet. Throwing more than a few of the STRIKE team to the floor.

"Three engines have failed!" The cry came over the speakers, "Evacuate. I repeat, evacuate. This is not a drill. Evacuate!"

The STRIKE team didn't even stop to pause as they started to run. Not that Hawkeye blamed them. Iron Man wasn't attacking them. He wasn't a threat. And every moment they spent trying to fight him was one less moment they could be spending getting off the Helicarrier. Already the sinking was obvious, and it would only get worse as the last engine was overloaded by the weight.

They were lucky that the last engine had held out. If it hadn't… Well they would be in free fall right then.

Not to mention that the Helicarrier was rigged to explode if necessary and Fury wouldn't want it falling into Iron Man's hands, so no doubt it was going to blow up in the near future.

"You're expecting me to run." Hawkeye matched Iron Man's stare, "Well, I'm not going anywhere. Unless it's with you. I will go down with this ship. I won't hold my hands up and surrender."

Hawkeye slipped the Shield on his back.

"I mean it." Hawkeye was firm, "Coulson can call all day and all night. You're my priority right now… God, I *told* you… Next time you feel like this… You come to me. And if this is your famous last stand… Well, I will not let you go alone into the dark."

"Better clench up, Legolas." Iron Man finally spoke.

Then he shifted and grabbed Hawkeye's shoulders.

It was almost relaxing, soaring through the sky. Knowing that he wouldn't be dropped or come to any harm. The speed was incredible, as well.

Moments later, they were inside what looked to be a large aircraft hold. Or at least part of one, it had a good portion of itself cordoned off behind walls. But it hadn't been on SHIELD's scanners or it would have caused an alert, Hawkeye knew that.

Feet moving lightly on the floor, Hawkeye took control of his own balance.

Iron Man strode a few steps ahead of him.

"Jarvis," The helmet folded down into the main armour, "Plot a course for DC."

"Course set, Sir." Jarvis' welcoming voice was a balm to Hawkeye's soul, "Should I inform our friend of your continued survival?"

"No." Tony breathed, "He won't take your call anyway. I told him not to. Not for another forty-eight hours. I had to give him time to get started."

"Apologies, Sir." Jarvis replied.

"That's okay, Jarvis." Tony waved an armour clad hand in the air.

"Tony." Clint breathed, "Oh God, Tony. Why? I *told* you. You got suicidal again. You come to *me*!"

"And where *were* you?" Tony stopped in his tracks, turning to face Clint, "Where? You haven't been there for me for a full *week*! Besides… I told you, I wouldn't go like that as long as I had Steve. And I don't have him anymore."

"This was more than a week's planning."

"True enough. Been planning since the funeral. I wouldn't have changed it. You know… This is Coulson's. Or it will be."

"What?"

"This plane." Tony raised a hand to wave around generally, "It's his. It's in the Will."

Clint's forward motion turned into a stumble for a moment. This wasn't just some wake up in the morning and decide to die suicide attempt. It had been planned sufficiently that Tony had

had time to adjust the Will.

"Figured since I was destroying the Helicarrier I should give him something new to start from." Tony carried on, "Figured the Avengers would need it."

"When did you figure it out?"

"Day after Thor got me drunk." Tony shrugged, "When I was reviewing the footage I managed to get hold of. Nothing made sense, until I fitted that little detail in. I… I never went looking for that information in SHIELD. It felt too much like cheating… And I didn't want to know. If I knew… I knew I'd slip up. I'd tell one version of you or the other, when I got stupid. Even if I didn't know the civilian version of you, I would have found you."

"And you didn't get angry?"

"I did at first. For about ten minutes. But then I realized it didn't matter. It didn't *matter* if Steve only got involved with me for access to Stark Industries… For access to my brain… It didn't matter if it wasn't real for him… Because it was real for *me*!"

"It was real for him." Clint was quick to respond, "He didn't know who you were until I told him. And that was long after the two of you started dating. He started a whole relationship with you *without* reporting it up the chain of command. Which was *completely* against protocols. I found out by accident. And covered for him. None of this was planned. At least not by us."

"When did you figure it out?"

"About a minute after you attacked the Helicarrier. I haven't yet told anyone. I came straight to the deck to talk to you. If anyone else knows… I don't know. But you hid it well. We thought it was Yinsen for a while."

"He's dead."

"Didn't know that then." Clint shrugged, "Though I guess the Cyclone was right. They said Iron Man was based in Stark Tower."

"Go figure." Tony snorted, "They actually got it right. You never came looking though."

"Figured we knew everywhere in the Tower… But you *built* that place. You must have hidden sections we don't even know about. And couldn't hope to find."

"I'm good like that."

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted the conversation, "I feel obliged to inform you that the broadcast goes out in approximately thirty seconds."

"Well," Tony breathed, "We'd best find a seat. We could do with some popcorn."

“Broadcast?” Clint cocked his head to one side.

“Kinda like what I did before I tried to retire the first time.” Tony grinned, “Only this one?… Mine’s going to be seen like a splash compared to the Tsunami that’s about to hit. Winter is Coming.”

Chapter End Notes

And yes, we have now officially passed the teaser at the beginning!

Chapter 53: Chapter 52

The last three words had sounded more intoned than merely spoken. Clint followed Tony closely as he recommenced leaving the cargo bay and into a far more comfortable room. Albeit via a few meters of corridor in-between.

Settling down in what looked like a fairly respectable passenger area, a TV screen was easily visible.

It flickered into life.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," The Winter Soldier's Russian accent was thick, but not to the point where it made his words impossible to understand, "I apologize for interrupting your normal daily routine. However, much as Iron Man before me, I have to make an announcement."

There were subtitles clearly visible at the bottom of the screen, just in case the accent caused problems. Which Clint thought was a particularly thoughtful addition.

"I am the Winter Soldier," He removed his goggles, revealing eyes surrounded by dark paint, "I was so named, because I was to be loyal through the winter, stronger than those who shrink back in the times that try men's souls. And loyal I have been.

"When Iron Man addressed you, he spoke of injustice and corruption. He spoke of those denied the judgement of Lady Justice. I wish to tell you a tale. It is about a Boy.

"He was just a Boy. He was not a good boy. Nor was he a bad boy. He loved his country. He loved it very much. However as much as he loved his country, he loved his friend more. His brother by another mother. Now his Brother… He *was* a good boy. A good man. He would stand up against injustice and inequality. He would protect those who were being bullied. Though he was small and scrawny he did not know how to back down from a fight.

“The Boy was always pulling his Brother out of fights. He protected his Brother as best he could. But the Brother would always say the same thing: ‘I had them on the ropes’.

“And War came to their country. The Boy, he joined the Army. He was old enough and strong enough. But his Brother… He was weak and ill. He had the heart of a mighty warrior. But he did not have the body. The Boy went to War.

“He did not last long. But he did not die. It would have been a kindness if he had. Instead he was captured. A Prisoner of War. Yet his captors did not see him as a prisoner. Not even as another human being. Nor any of his fellow prisoners. They were simply test subjects. Any taken as such. They died as such. One by one they died. Until it was the Boy’s turn. He did not die. Though there were times he wished he could. He hung on. By fingertips and teeth, he clung to life. Every moment he lived was one less moment someone else went through Hell. So he hung on. He gave them nothing, except his name, his rank and his serial number. Those words became his lifeline. His link to sanity.

“Then one day, hands came. They undid the straps that held him down. They helped him up. He looked up and saw his Brother. “I thought you were dead.” His Brother said. “I thought you were smaller.” The Boy replied. For his Brother was small and scrawny no longer. He had the body suited to contain the heart and soul he had always had.

“One man, the Brother, had come alone to rescue them all when all others had written them off. And rescue them all he did. He had come for one. But he took all. And when he was offered the best of men to make a unit to hunt those who had hurt the Boy, he chose his own. From those he had rescued. Those chosen, willingly agreed to follow the Captain back into Hell. But the Boy would not follow the Captain. Instead it was the little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb to run away from a fight who he would follow.”

Clint hadn’t noticed until then, but the Russian accent had been fading. Now, it was gone completely. And there was a distinct Brooklyn twang there. However, there was something else. The story sounded very familiar. But different. As if he’d heard it from a different view point.

“The team were commandos. They went where no one else dared. They were so crazy they howled at the moon. They fought fiercely. The Boy protected his Brother. He had been identified as a good sniper in training. That skill allowed him to watch his Brother’s back. He protected his Brother with everything he had.

“And that included his life. When he fell from a train on a cliff, he thought… He *believed* he had sacrificed his life for his Brother.

“However he survived. Though once again he wished he did not. He had fallen back into the hands of those who had experimented on him before. This time, though, they did not come to experiment. They had been successful. Else how could he have survived the fall?

“Instead they took from him. They took from him his memories. His will. His independence. His country. His home. His name. His Brother. Until all that was left was an empty shell for them to manipulate and control as they would. Anything they told him was the truth as far as he knew. Anything they ordered was to be followed. They became his whole world.

“And to them, he was less than human. No longer a boy or even a man. He was a weapon. To be sent where they willed. To do as they willed. When not needed they froze him, until such time as he was needed.

“And though his heart ached with a need and a want he did not understand; he could not disobey. For any attempt caused pain beyond imagining. He was broken. Shattered into a million pieces and unable to put himself back together.

“Until one day… One day when he was defrosted and there were no commands. No orders. Just peace. He knew he was in a place he did not know. But with all the times that his memories had been stolen from him and all the times he had been moved while frozen, that was nothing new. But a Handler, who gave no commands. Who demanded nothing… That was new.

“With time, the Boy reclaimed himself. But he did not forget those who had abused him so. Who had *used* him so. His new Handler was not a Handler. He was a friend. A rescuer. A younger brother. He had raised arms against the abusers. And invited the Boy to do the same. No obligation. No requirement. Simply an invitation.

“And I took it. I fought against them once. And I fight against them now. When Iron Man, my rescuer, left me earlier, he was going to buy me time to make this broadcast. Most

likely with his life.

"He has gone out to face my enemy alone. And my enemy is and was and always will be Hydra. The Captain did not kill them. He got rid of the Red Skull. But there were others. And they laid low. Building their strength. Gathering their numbers. Securing their strongholds. Often using me to do so.

"Hydra lives. Hidden away. Iron Man and I have spent months gathering our proof. Identifying members of Hydra. We had to be careful. They have infected many places. Many organisations. Most crucially they have infected SHIELD. And it has become their fortress.

"Well, no longer. I have dumped onto the internet the names and details of every single Hydra Agent and Supporter. I have dumped the locations of their bases. I have dumped the details of their crimes. The details of their plots. Their plans. Every secret that Hydra had… Is now yours to peruse. You can't stop the signal.

"We collected the evidence with one goal in mind. We were going to present it to Captain America. We would show him the evidence and he would believe. Then he would be able to take it to the people who could use it to take Hydra down without all of this…

"But Hydra killed him first. Oh, yes, it was not Iron Man who killed the Captain. It was Hydra. Scared for some reason. The Captain must have gotten close to discovering Hydra. But not close enough to know to be careful. I have been used to silence those who got close before. So I know how far they will go.

"Rise up, people of the world. Rise up against Hydra. They have created war and terror and fear in order to control you. Rise up and turn that against them. Let *them* run and hide. Hunt them, to the ends of the Earth.

"My message for Hydra is simple. You know what I am. You made me this. You took a decent person and twisted him for your own gain. And I shall be the weapon wielded against you. This is your one and only warning. Turn yourselves in to the authorities. Confess all of your crimes. Submit to their judgement without attempts to bargain. Then I will not come for you.

“Omit one crime. Bargain to reduce your sentence by one day… And I will come for you. I am the Winter Soldier. And as you should know, Winter will kill without regret or conscience. Indeed, I will take great pleasure in it. You know how far I will go. Till the end of the line.

“Because you took from me my Captain. You took from me my memories. This day, you have taken from me my rescuer, Iron Man. But above all, in all your folly, you took from me my *name*.”

Clint stared fascinated, as the Winter Soldier reached up to remove his lower mask.

“My name is James Buchanan Barnes. Rank: Sergeant. Serial Number: three, two, five, five, seven, zero, three, eight. You might know me better as Sergeant Barnes. Or perhaps as Bucky Barnes.

“You took my Captain from me. My skinny, scrawny, little guy from Brooklyn.

“You took my Iron Man from me. My knight in blood caked armour. Mostly his own.

“I am the Winter Soldier. Winter is Coming. Run.”

The transmission ended.

“Jimmy?” Clint stared at Tony, “The Winter Soldier has been right under our noses? As Jimmy the *Security Guard*?”

“Yeah.” Tony nodded, “I’d best go give him a hand. He’s going to have his full.”

“Phil.” Clint breathed, “He was on the Helicarrier. He could be with…”

“He’s not Hydra. I checked. Him and all the Avengers. You’re all clean.”

“You didn’t trust us.”

“Can you blame me?” Tony shrugged, “Here. This’ll get you through.”

Clint accepted the phone.

"You sure?" He asked quietly, "SOP is to turn off all phones."

"His is Stark." Tony replied, "It'll work."

"I need him safe." Clint was earnest, "Can you get him here?"

"I'll divert his lifeboat." Tony declared, "It'll come aboard. You get him off. And *only* him. I can't trust most of the Helicarrier staff. Most of them are Hydra. Same with the STRIKE teams.

"Right." Clint nodded.

Tony had already dialled the number. All Clint had to do was hit one button, which he did.

"Coulson." The phone was answered after a long pause.

"Phil." Clint sighed in relief, "You're okay."

"Francis." The name chilled Clint's spine.

It was a sign. That Phil wasn't sure if he could trust Clint right then. That he believed that Clint had been compromised. But there was a sliver of hope. Phil wouldn't use it, unless he believed that he could talk Clint out of the path he was taking.

"I know." Clint breathed, "They've told you."

"Yes."

"I know it looks bad. You know I've always said I see better from a distance… Well, I was too close to the problem. Both parts of it. And once I got a bit of distance… Things suddenly made a lot more sense. I don't understand everything right now. But I understand more than I did… Do you still have the Collector's Edition?"

"Yes."

"Your lifeboat has been temporarily diverted. It's coming aboard where I am. You get off with the Collector's Edition. It goes on its way. You give me ten minutes. Ten minutes to

learn what I know. To see what I've seen. And then I'll follow whatever order you give. I promise, in those ten minutes, no harm will come to anyone."

"No Loki?"

"Nothing like that. Look, you know that thing that's been bugging me for the last three days? I figured it out. I figured it out before I set foot on the top deck. And figuring it out changed nearly everything. You know I never miss. Well, I've never *wanted* to miss as much as today."

"Why?"

"Because as it's true, we screwed up. We screwed up big time. All of us… Look, ten minutes. That's all I'm asking. If you ever trusted me. Trust me now. Any debt that exists between us… I'm cashing it in now."

"Proof." Phil demanded, though his voice was soft.

"The first time I kissed you, I thought I kissed you goodbye. The first time you kissed me… It was a welcome home, at last."

"Ten minutes." Phil conceded, "Then you are mine. And you will do as I instruct."

"Bet you dinner, you won't tell me to change my mind." Clint grinned.

Phil's response was to hang up.

"You ought to contact Jimmy." Clint instructed, "You don't want him to think you're dead."

"I can't." Tony shook his head, "We prepared for this. He won't answer any calls from anyone pertaining to be me for two days. Enough time to give him a head-start. Besides, I told him I wasn't coming back. He knows I wouldn't contact him now, until I got into a fight I couldn't handle. Not wanting to distract him. He would be suspicious of anything else. He knows how far Hydra will go."

"Great." Clint muttered.

"Master Clint," Jarvis spoke up, "Your guests are arriving in the next sixty seconds. May I advise that you are present to greet them?"

"Thank you, Jarvis." Clint agreed, as he headed back out, "Can I ask a favour?"

"You may ask, Master Clint. I may decline to assist."

“Don’t tell Tony about what you are about to see… He’ll need to see it with his own eyes. It might push him over the edge… Also don’t talk until after Tony sees. I think it’ll be best.”

“I shall use my own judgement as to whether I agree with you, Master Clint.”

Clint took a deep breath as the lifeboat landed.

Phil emerged, partly supporting Steve, resplendent in his uniform. He was listing slightly. No doubt needing more time to process the traces of the drug in his system. Idly, Clint wondered exactly *what* they had used, and how terminal it usually was.

The three of them watched as the lifeboat took off again.

“Nine minutes.” Phil reminded.

“Won’t even need half that.” Clint smiled cockily, “Your Shield, my Captain.”

“Am I still your Captain?” Steve had obviously been filled in on some of the details.

“Always.” Clint was smug, “This way.”

He led them quickly down the corridor, pushing open the door to where Tony was.

“Great,” Tony didn’t turn around, “You got your freaking lover-boy, Katniss. *Now* can we go fight Hydra?”

“Tony?” Steve almost stumbled as he moved towards the figure.

“Steve?” Tony spun around in the chair, which *had* to be specially reinforced.

Tony shook his head, closing his eyes as he did so.

“No. Steve’s dead. I’m dreaming again.” Tony slapped himself, “I’m dreaming. I don’t want to dream this anymore. It hurts when I wake up. I want to wake up. I want to wake

up! It hurts too much when I wake up and forget he's not there anymore."

And damn if that didn't tug on Clint's heart.

Steve crossed the room in an instant, catching Tony's hand where it was poised to hit himself for a second time.

"Not a dream." Steve whispered, "I'm here. I'm right here. You're safe. I'm right here. Right here. As you wish. As you wish. As you wish. As you wish."

Chapter 54: Chapter 53

Clint tugged Phil out the room.

"Now do you see what I see?" Clint grinned.

"This is bad." Phil muttered, "Tony killed Steve?"

"No. It wasn't him. He said that. And I believe him."

"Good." Phil was breathing a little easier.

"Not good." Clint shook his head, "That means someone else has the Irondroids. And this is where things get bad."

"How bad?"

"Jimmy the Security Guard? He's the Winter Soldier."

"That's bad."

"It gets worse. His name is James Buchannan Barnes."

"Unfortunate name."

"Not really… He's the original."

"That's bad."

"It gets worse. He was Hydra's puppet."

"Puppet?"

"Like I was Loki's." And *damn* if that didn't say how rattled Clint was by this whole thing. He *never* talked about Loki.

"That's bad."

"It gets worse. Hydra infected SHIELD. Tony found out. He said most of the STRIKE teams are Hydra. Same with the Helicarrier crew."

"That's why he was attacking SHIELD." Phil's eyes widened, "Does he have proof?"

"Considering the Winter Soldier just pulled an Iron Man and did an info dump on the internet… I'd say yes."

"Then they'll be scrabbling to recover. No doubt launching an attack."

“I think the whole Iron Man attacking the Helicarrier was to take parts of Hydra out of commission for a while. Keep them distracted.”

“That won’t last for long. I doubt all of them were on the Helicarrier. They’ll retaliate. Now they are exposed, they have to make a grab for power before people can recover fast enough.”

“Crap.” Clint muttered, “I didn’t think about that.”

“When did Tony find out?”

“Hydra or Avengers? Avengers… Day after Thor got him drunk. Hydra… Sometime between New York and Alaska… I think.”

“Probably when he was hacking SHIELD looking for me.” Phil muttered, “And then there was that convenient kidnapping… Maybe it wasn’t AIM, but Hydra. After all, when AIM *did* get hold of him later they were more interested in making him fix Extremis than questioning him.”

“Hydra framed AIM?” Clint blinked, “Okay, that’s new. Believable. And that’s even more worrying.”

“Agreed.” Phil muttered, “We’d best break up the reunion. We’re going to need both of them.”

“Knock, knock.” Clint chirped as he pushed the door open, “I hope you’re both still decent.”

“I can’t figure out how to take off his armour, or we wouldn’t be.” Steve fired back.

“Did not need to know that.” Clint murmured, “Anyway, we need to figure out what we’re going to do about Hydra.”

“Hydra?” Steve blinked.

“I’m going to secure the Capital.” Tony was firm, “Briar will meet me there. He’s securing New York. Then moving to DC.”

“Briar?” Steve stared at Tony, “What’s Briar got to do with anything? That’s Jimmy, right? The security guard? I’ve never met him.”

“Oh, you have.” Clint muttered, “He’s also known as the Winter Soldier.”

“Oh great.” Steve sighed, “Suppose I should have guessed that. Given that Tony is *Iron Man*!”

“He also has another name.” Tony whispered, “You know him.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” Steve ran his hand over Tony’s cheek, brushing away a few escaping tears.

“He’s also known as Bucky.” Tony finished.

Steve’s hand froze.

“That’s impossible.” Steve pointed out, “Bucky’s dead.”

“Hydra experimented on him.” Tony reminded, “They were working on recreating the Super Soldier Serum. I won’t say they succeeded. But I wouldn’t exactly call it a failure.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?”

“I didn’t know you were the Captain. Briar never said. I think he was enjoying watching us. Laughing at us.”

“When did he tell you?”

“He never did. I figured it out, after I got drunk.”

“You got drunk?” Steve’s face was partly disappointed, partly grieving, “You were doing so well.”

“Blame Thor.” Tony shrugged, “He figured it was a suitable memorial for you. Some Viking stroke Asgardian thing.”

“I didn’t find out until he was completely sloshed.” Clint put in, “Jarvis decided I was the right person to intervene. It seems no one told our Asgardian about the potential dangers of alcohol.”

“How are we doing this?” Steve asked, “New York and then DC?”

“No.” Phil shook his head, “We need DC secure as quickly as possible.”

“We can’t leave the Avengers without direction in New York.” Clint reminded.

“I’ve got a small flier.” Tony offered, “It can only take one person. But it moves faster than my Suit does. No weapons. Less weight.”

“What was it meant for?” Clint asked slightly nervously.

“My nefarious kidnapping of Captain America.” Tony’s voice was deadpan.

“What?” Steve stared, “You’re serious?”

“Absolutely.” Tony nodded, “The original plan was to gather the evidence, kidnap the Captain, present you with the evidence and then let you decide what happened next. We figured you would make the right choice.”

“And you wouldn’t?” Steve challenged.

“Well, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to talk Briar down. His original plans involved a lot of guns and explosions.” Tony shrugged, “He calmed down eventually. We decided you were the best person to make the decision. And you’d know who to get involved. And they’d trust you. They’d trust the evidence you gave them. And Briar said you’d trust him. So that was all golden. Anyway, it’ll get someone to New York faster than this bird will. No matter *how* Jarvis pushes the engines. Ain’t that right, Jay?”

“Of course, Sir. May I also inform you that operating the engines at one hundred and ten percent for this period of time, will mean it will require a complete overhaul in the near future.”

“Put it on my schedule.” Tony waved his hands negligently.

“A pleasure to do so, Sir.” Jarvis responded immediately, “I will place it in the next available slot. Which is tomorrow. All day.”

“All day?” Steve frowned, “You rarely manage to clear a full day… What happened? How’d you manage that? Pepper help?”

“Sir managed to entirely clear his schedule.” Jarvis supplied, “He has nothing booked in at all.”

“What?” Steve stared at Tony, “Why would you do that? There’s always something. Why would you completely clear your schedule?”

“I…” Tony looked away.

“It’s not important.” Clint cut in, “Jarvis, this isn’t the time. Tony, your head in the game?”

“I’m… I’m alright.” Tony nodded, “I think Steve goes to New York to keep things secure there.”

“No.” Phil shook his head, “Clint goes to New York. We need Captain America in DC. The Captain protecting the Capital? That’s a powerful image. It’ll help turn things in our favour. Help people stand up and fight.”

“I cannot abandon New York.” Steve protested, “It’s my *home*!”

“The others are there.” Clint reminded, “I can get them to protect New York.”

“No.” Tony interrupted, “Move them to DC. Get Reed and Xavier to protect New York. It’s their home too. Captain America protecting DC is a powerful image. But Hydra have managed to get people into powerful positions. We could end up facing the Armed Forces.”

“But I’ll have you beside me.” Steve pointed out, “Iron Man.”

"That'll turn people against you." Tony countered, "I'm a terrorist, remember? Besides, I have to make a detour. There's something I need to destroy. Or rather, *three* somethings."

"Project Insight." Phil breathed, "You found out about *that*?"

"Of course." Tony nodded, "And I know about Hydra's intended perversion of it."

"Perversion?" Phil leaned forward, "How?"

"How I found out or what Hydra will do?" Tony shrugged, "One, I'm good at what I do. Two, Hydra plan to use the weapons linked to an algorithm designed by Zola. It'll allow them to target anyone who would oppose Hydra or could be a threat to Hydra… *Before* they become a problem."

"Director Fury would never allow…" Phil began.

"No," Tony cut across, "He wouldn't. But others would. You don't realize how far Hydra have gotten. They are *extremely* dangerous. They are sneaky and cunning and deadly. You don't know how many people they have gotten rid of, simply because it was easier than working around them. You don't know how many people they have silenced. You don't know how many deaths they have orchestrated to lead the world to a place where they would willingly accept a watchdog. Not realizing that the watchdog would be their ruler, not their servant… I have pieced together their history. From the fall of the Red Skull through the rise of Zola to now. I know more about them than anyone else alive. Even themselves. I know secrets and lies and the death toll I can directly lay at their feet. Trust me Agent, Fury is no part of Hydra; but that doesn't mean they didn't twist his ideas or even present them to him in the first place. Diplomacy is the art of letting other people have your way. And some Hydra agents are very, *very* skilled at making an idea seem to come from someone else. I suspect that even you have been previously manipulated by Hydra."

"I would have noticed." Phil countered, "Director Fury would have noticed."

"Sitwell." Tony's gaze was locked with Phil's, "Senator Stern. Alexander Pierce."

"Manipulated by Hydra?" Phil asked.

"No." Tony's eyes hardened, "They *are* Hydra. Pierce is in charge at the moment. He took over from Zola. But Zola acted as his advisor for a good while."

"Who else?" Phil demanded.

"Too many to name." Tony returned, "The evidence and the names are online. You can't stop the signal, Phil. Everything goes somewhere, and Jarvis goes everywhere."

"You aim to misbehave." Steve grinned.

"Oh, do I." Tony's eyes glittered with amusement for a moment, "You deal with Congress. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

“Project Insight is under extreme protection.” Phil warned.

“I just took down the Helicarrier.” Tony pointed out, “Don’t worry. I’ll bring the walls crumbling down on Insight as well.”

Phil stared at Tony for a long moment. Apparently assessing Tony’s words and his ability.

Clint had to admit that while he had initially been thrown by the strangeness of seeing Tony in Iron Man armour he had not failed to notice some worrying signs. Tony’s complexion was pale and wan. His eyes were sunken and his cheeks hollow. He had clearly not been eating properly. Nor sleeping enough.

It was only determination and adrenaline that had kept Tony going this long. Who knew how much longer he could go?

But Clint could also tell that Tony would not agree to being left behind.

Steve, on the other hand, had virtually recovered from his enforced slumber. He was clearly well rested and ready to fight. An intense anger burning inside his heart… Burning in his soul.

Steve would not stop until the fight was over.

Tony… Would keep going as long as he could. And would not be persuaded to stay behind.

“Fine.” Phil nodded, “Clint moves the Avengers to DC. Steve and I will start with the White House. Then we move to Capitol Hill. Tony does Insight and then joins us. But you’re not to push yourself beyond your limits, Tony. You’re barely standing. This hasn’t been an easy time for you.”

“I’ll do what I need to.” Tony countered.

“You have to look after yourself.” Steve’s hands returned to Tony’s face, “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

Tony turned his face away. A slight blush of shame dusting his cheeks.

"Come on, Robin Hood." Tony instructed, rising to his feet, "I'd best get you back to New York, asap."

Clint tagged along behind Tony. Strangely despite the armour, Tony's movements were virtually silent.

"You're going to have to tell him at some point." Clint pointed out.

"I can deal with that *after* we've beaten Hydra." Tony countered.

"And how long will that take?"

"Okay." Tony fired back, "After we've dealt with this battle. After we've stopped them from taking America. Then I'll tell him."

"Or I will." Clint nodded, "How fast is this ship of yours?"

"Extremely." Tony stated, "And it's not a ship."

"Then what is it?" Clint asked.

"This."

Tony pointed at a bright gold suit of armour. There was some blue in the design, forming wings on both the chest-plate and helmet. But it was subtle.

"Little ostentatious." Clint blinked.

"Gold-Titanium Alloy." Tony retorted, "I'm not actually made of Iron. It was the first thing I found that dealt with the icing problem of going too high. I found a different method for Rhodey's Suit, when I was upgrading it from the original base design. It's slightly heavier. But works just as well. And is cheaper. The problem is that you need a thicker layer to get the same level of defensive protection. So it's significantly heavier overall. Thus War Machine is slower. I needed this fast and light. But with enough protection. Gold-Titanium was the best way to go."

"And the blue?"

“Because I felt like it.” Tony admitted, “There’s no weapons on this thing. Well, beyond the Repulsors. I certainly wouldn’t advise fighting in it. But it’s fast. Faster than even my Suit. Jarvis is linked in. He’ll help you fly. Can override you if necessary. Once you’re back in New York, it’ll fold back up. Make sure it gets left someplace safe.”

“Of course.” Clint agreed, “Don’t worry, Tony. I’ll get the Avengers and we’ll watch each other’s backs.”

“Go to my hidden lair.” Tony instructed. “There’s a hidden ship. Small and fast. But large enough to take all of you. It’ll be quicker.”

“How do I find it?”

“Ask Jarvis or Briar. Or Rhodey. He knows about it too.”

“How many people knew about Iron Man?” Clint asked softly.

“Jarvis and Briar.” Tony shrugged, “Oh, and Dummy and Butterfingers and U. Rhodey knows my hidden lair as a Tony thing. Not an Iron Man thing.”

“One real person and four of your own creations.” Clint breathed, “Oh, you must have been so lonely.”

“It was alright.” Tony smiled, “I had you guys. And I’m used to being alone. Orien open.”

The suit opened up from the front. Clint stepped forward, turning around as he did so. The Suit quickly closed around him. It was somewhat uncomfortable, with his quiver pressing slightly into his back, but he’d been in more uncomfortable positions before. It would pass.

Besides, he *wasn’t* leaving his quiver and bow behind.

“Stay safe.” Clint instructed, only moments before Jarvis started to fly him out of the aircraft and away.

Chapter 55: Chapter 54

Flying *in* a Suit was nothing like flying in a Suit's arms. There was no rush of wind through the hair, instead a dazzling array of information danced past the eyes. Providing flight data at a rate far beyond Clint's speed of reading. And it was overlaid on the world dashing past his eyes.

"Jarvis," Clint sighed, "Either slow the data down or get rid of it completely. I can't read that fast. And I have *no* idea how to fly this thing anyway. You're doing more of the work than I am."

"Very good, Master Clint. Would you perhaps care for an inflight movie instead?"

"Tony set this thing up to have an inflight movie?"

"Indeed. Sir, was not sure how long he would be making the Captain's flight. So he decided to include some entertainment. However, you will not have sufficient time to enjoy a full movie, before we arrive in New York. Would you, instead, care for an episode of anything, Master Clint?"

"I was watching Leverage on Steve's tablet."

"I will pick up with the next episode, Master Clint. If you have no objections?"

"Sounds good." Clint shrugged.

Immediately the data vanished, as well as the outside world. To be replaced by the opening scene of the show.

The episode had only just finished, when Jarvis spoke again.

"Five minutes until landfall, Master Clint. Would you care for an update as to the current situation?"

"Please."

"Hydra have only a small presence in the city, comparatively speaking, Master Clint. Most of their number in the city are concentrated in trying to take certain strategic locations. The Baxter Building, the Empire State Building and Stark Tower. They already hold Lady Liberty. However, the Fantastic Four are holding their own at the Baxter Building. Spiderman

and the Hulk are defending the Empire State Building along with Wolverine. The Falcon, War Machine and the Black Widow are in the process of restoring the freedom of Lady Liberty. The security personnel at Stark Tower are successfully maintaining a perimeter. Unlike the other locations, they have not been hampered by being infiltrated by Hydra at the time. The other locations initially believed that they were being assigned protection by SHIELD, when they were, in fact, being infiltrated. Unfortunately, Thor is not currently available, as he left for Asgard approximately two days ago."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Lady Liberty will be freed in the next minute or so, depending upon how long it takes the Black Widow to take out the Hydra guards around the hostages, Master Clint. They are the only true resistance on the island. The rest of the resistance is airborne, the Irondroids, as SHIELD has dubbed them, and both the Falcon and War Machine have that well in hand. The Empire State Building shouldn't take much longer. Most of Hydra's forces are concentrated on Stark Tower."

"Logical. It's pretty self-sufficient and has technology that can be weaponized. Be a good place to hold. Even if it's not a National icon."

"Precisely why Sir ensured that all possible precautions were taken, Master Clint. All Hydra agents were either headhunted, fell fowl of SI's morality clauses, got arrested or got promoted to places where they can do no harm."

"You sure about that last one?"

"You would be surprised at Sir's ingenuity, Master Clint."

"Considering my current situation? No. I really think I wouldn't. Can you patch me into the Avenger's comms?"

"Of course, Master Clint. Speak and they will hear you."

"This is Hawkeye to all Avengers. I am aware of the current situation. Do *not* expect back-up from SHIELD in the near future. They are dealing with their internal crisis. We are on our own. However, the Winter Soldier is on our side. Or rather, we're on his."

"What is going on?" The Falcon demanded, "And how come you're in charge?"

"Because I know what is going on." Hawkeye fired back, "Because I have more of the pieces of the puzzle than you do. And I do not have *time* to fill you in on the details. I got briefed. By Iron Man. He's not dead. He would have been if his plan had played out. But I got in the way. Exact details can wait for later. A lot later. After this Hydra thing has been dealt with. Finish with your situations quickly. Meet me at Stark Tower. We have work to do. People to Avenge. Over and Out."

Jarvis helpfully cut the line.

"If it would help, Master Clint," Jarvis spoke, "I can connect you with Master Jimmy. Though I cannot guarantee that he will listen."

"Make it so." Hawkeye instructed.

"Connected, Master Clint."

"Winter Soldier…" Hawkeye paused, "Look, I know we've been on opposite sides for a long time. But we're not anymore. We need to team up. Else you're going to be dead before you get your revenge… Or are you after Justice? Meet me at the Tower. I'll keep the Avengers under control. I'm willing to bet that you know they're clean, just like I do."

Silence was his only response.

"You can't do this alone, Howlie. Let us help you. Let *me* help you, Bucky… Jimmy… For Tony."

"Understood. Over and Out." Was the reply he got after another pause.

Letting out a slow breath, Hawkeye looked at the world through the Suit's visor.

"If I might make a suggestion, Master Clint?" Jarvis spoke up.

"Fire away."

"There is a passage from Sir's workshop out of the Tower. If I bring you in through the top, you can exit and join with the Avengers at the bottom, Master Clint."

"You'll have to guide me. But that sounds like a good plan."

That high up, there was no chance of anyone spotting Clint as he landed on the Stark Tower balcony. Clint stumbled slightly on landing. He suddenly realized why the balcony was so big, and why Tony had a small "drone" landing pad with no railing around it. As he went down the steps from the pad and towards the penthouse, robots dismantled the Suit around him. All he had to do was literally walk out of the Suit.

“And *how* have I never noticed that thing before?” Clint breathed, “Tony *literally* built Iron Man into the Tower.”

“It was originally intended by Sir to be a memorial, Master Clint.” Jarvis declared, “A reminder of what he had been. However, when he needed to re-don the Iron Man Armour, he repurposed it for emergencies. His usual landing pad is several floors lower down. However, that requires a higher level of skill and expectation for how to land. I cannot guarantee your landing without assistance.”

“Which I am ill-prepared to give you.” Clint agreed, “Okay, Tony’s workshop.”

Once in the workshop, Clint looked around for where to go. One of the walls slid back slightly, before sliding sideways opening up a passage way.

“How many of these passageways did Tony build *into* this place?” Clint muttered.

“A great many, Master Clint.” Jarvis replied, “I am not allowed to inform you of the precise number. If you enter the passageway, there is an elevator to take you out of the building.”

“Okay,” Clint nodded, “Can you stay on the Avengers’ comm line? I might need to talk to you.”

“Of course, Master Clint. I will be monitoring. Simply speak and I shall hear and carry out your requests to the best of my ability.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Clint smiled as he descended in the lift.

123456789

It didn’t take all that long to deal with the Hydra Agents outside of Stark Tower. Not after the others turned up. They were too disorganised. Too disjointed. They hadn’t expected the need to attack so soon. They were not prepared for it.

“Rhodey,” Hawkeye snapped, “Tony once told me, he had a small fast plane. Something faster than anything else around. Something large enough to take all of us. Said it was in his Hidden Lair. You know it?”

“I know it.” War Machine replied.

“Get it.” Hawkeye ordered, “We’re going to need it.”

“I’ll bring it here.” He soared off.

“Spiderman,” Hawkeye turned to the youngest of the team, “You’re staying here. You’re going to be our liaison. You work with Richards and his team, and with Xavier and his people. You keep New York safe. The rest of us are going to DC.”

“Me?” Spiderman stared, “Why me? There has to be a better option.”

“No.” Hawkeye shook his head, “You’re a team player. And you’re smart. Smart enough to understand Richards. And you know people… You know everyone. Every hero in this city… You know them. And they know you. You know their strengths and their weaknesses. You’ve worked with them. And if some of the tales I’ve heard are right, you’ve worked against them as well, when necessary. They all like you. And they’ll work with you. The Avengers have to go to DC. We can’t let the Capital fall. But we have to keep New York safe too. It’s an icon. That’s your job. You keep New York safe. Do whatever you have to do. But you keep our home safe.”

“Someone else would be better suited.” Spiderman tried again.

“Who?” Hawkeye waved his hands at the group, “The Hulk would end up fighting the Thing… Again. The Black Widow prefers to work behind the scenes. She’s not a General. Or even a Captain. She’s a Specialist. War Machine? A Colonel, yes. But he barely knows anyone in New York, at least on the hero front. Same for the Falcon. Thor is too overbearing, prone to unintentional insults and doesn’t have a great head for different tactics. Besides he’s god only knows where right now. I have to go to DC, because I know the plan. And I have more of the pieces of the puzzle than anyone else here right now. And there is no time to explain it to anyone else. It has to be you. You’ll have a direct line of communication to me. And I’ll pass on what you need to know, when you need to know it.”

“At a time like this, is this really the right time to have secrets?” The Falcon accused.

“Fuck it, *yes*!” Hawkeye snapped, “Because those secrets are big and complicated and have *far* too much information for you to accept right now. Not without physical proof. My word alone won’t be enough. I know that. I am not keeping secrets because I *want* to. But because it’ll actually be *quicker* if I keep them, right now. And before you even start on me, Tasha. I’m calling in that marker from Bahrain.”

“You said you’d never use it.” The Black Widow looked at him.

“And you said I would.” Hawkeye fired back, “So I guess you were right and I was wrong. Kid, I’ll inform the other teams. So it comes from authority. This is Hawkeye to all points, do you read me?”

“Hawkeye?” Johnny Storm’s voice came over the line, “How’d you get this frequency? Hey, Reed! The Avengers just hacked our comms! I thought you said they were secure.”

“Never mind that.” Hawkeye was firm, “This is a courtesy call. The Avengers are going to DC. We’re leaving Spiderman as our liaison here. He’ll keep you informed of developments as you need them. And keep you updated on where Hydra is. He’s got Overwatch. Understood?”

“Why do you get to call the shots?” Johnny sneered.

“Because I say so.” Hawkeye retorted, “Because I know more about what is going on than you do.”

“Hydra exist and are attacking.” Johnny countered, “What else *is* there to know?”

“A hell of a lot!” Hawkeye snapped, “Just do *it*!”

“I take it that goes for us as well, bub.” Logan’s drawl came through loud and clear.”

“Yes.” Hawkeye nodded, even though he knew they couldn’t see him, “Are you going to argue as well?”

“Don’t reckon so.” Logan’s voice was calm, “Don’t particularly like Hydra. And Chuck says that you’re in charge for now. Basically all you’re doing is giving us a Commanding Officer. Who I know won’t be messing us around. He’s got his head on straight. It’s a-okay with me. ‘Sides, I like the little bug.”

And *that*? That was a ringing endorsement from Wolverine. Something *not* to be sniffed at.

“Johnny, stop causing problems.” Susan’s voice was firm, “Hawkeye, message received loud and clear. We will have no problems with that.”

“Says you.” Johnny put in.

“Johnny, will you stop that?” Susan demanded, “You *like* Spiderman. Don’t think I don’t know about the poker sessions you and Ben have with him and Logan. It’s someone you like. So stop grumbling for the sake of grumbling. Fantastic Four, Over and Out.”

“X-Men, Over and Out.” Logan closed the line his end.

“You play poker with the *Wolverine*?” Hawkeye stared at Spiderman.

“Yes.” The kid nodded, “But I don’t think now is the best time for this.”

“Where’s Tony?” The Falcon put in, “I haven’t seen him since before we had that last fight with Iron Man.”

“He’s alright.” Hawkeye was firm.

“You are sure?” The Black Widow queried, “Because I checked. He’s not in his Workshop. But he was there yesterday.”

“I know where he is.” Hawkeye kept his voice calm, “I know who he’s with. And I trust them. And the Tower is secure. As long as they can’t wiggle like Spidey here.”

“What about the Irondroids?” Spiderman asked, “Personally I’m more worried about them, than skinny guys like me sneaking in.”

“Hulk smash Flying Monkeys.” The Hulk put in.

“Not right now, big guy.” Hawkeye placated the green monster, “We have to go somewhere else first. Can we have Banner back? He’s a little easier to transport.”

“Flying Monkeys hurt Star Man.” The Hulk grumbled.

“He doesn’t really get it, does he?” The Falcon sighed, “It was more than just an owie, big guy.”

“Flying Monkeys hurt Tin Man,” The Hulk carried on, “Hurt Shiny Heart.”

“You’re more complicated than we think,” Hawkeye suddenly had a moment of clarity, “Aren’t you, big guy?”

“Hulk not stupid.” The Hulk seemed to preen at the comment.

“No.” Hawkeye shook his head, “No, you most definitely are not. You ever tell your other half?”

“Banner dumb.” The Hulk dismissed the question.

“Not really.” Hawkeye shrugged, “He just doesn’t see things the way you do. None of us do. You’re thinking in curves when the rest of us are trained to think in straight lines.”

A crackle of lightening in a clear sky followed by the sharp crack of thunder warned them sufficiently to get out the way, distracting everyone from the Hulk. Only moments before Thor materialized. However, he wasn’t alone.

“Why is *he* here?!” Hawkeye pointed in fury at Loki.

“My Brother declared that Midgard was doomed without his assistance.” Thor replied calmly, “He hath sworn an oath to do no harm to Midgard in this brief respite from his imprisonment. He fears for the security of Midgard. He hath stated that should Midgard fall, Asgard would follow soon after. For demons run from a good man heading to war.”

“We have nothing to fear from good men.” The Black Widow scoffed, “Good men are not to be feared. For they have too many rules.”

“Good men do not need rules, little Spider.” Loki arched an eyebrow at her, “Today is not a good day to find out why He has so many.”

“Demons run when a good man goes to war?” Spiderman frowned.

“Night will fall and drown in sun,” Loki nodded, “When a good man goes to war.”

“Friendship dies and true love lies.” Spiderman continued.

“Night will fall and the dark will rise,” Loki didn’t miss a beat, “When a good man goes to war.”

“Demons run, but count the cost.” Spiderman’s voice was filled with awe now.

“The battle’s won, but the child is lost.” Loki finished.

“He’s a Whovian?” Spiderman was shocked, “He’s a freaking Whovian? How? I mean, seriously? How’d he get TV on Asgard? I doubt he was on Earth long enough to marathon the series.”

“Our mother thought it would help him,” Thor shrugged, “To see what Midgardians valued in entertainment. To see a reflection of yourselves.”

“I think that wasn’t a good idea.” Hawkeye muttered.

“Ah,” Loki smiled at him, “My little Hawk.”

“Not yours,” Hawkeye threw his answer back instantly, “Never yours.”

“No,” Loki tilted his head slightly, “You are right. Even when I had you, you were not wholly mine. Your heart and your loyalty were given to others. My power over you could not change that. Though I doubt you realized what you had given away. And to whom.”

“Maybe not then,” Hawkeye conceded, “But I do now.”

“Then you know why we must fear the anger of Him.” Loki’s voice sounded pained.

“Yes,” Hawkeye nodded, “Everybody knows that everybody dies.”

“And nobody knows it like Him.” Loki’s tone indicated that he had finished the phrase.

“But I do think that all the skies of all the worlds might just turn dark if he ever, *for one moment*, accepts it.” Hawkeye carried on, “Everybody knows that everybody dies. But not every day. Not today. Some days are special. Some days are so, so blessed. Some days, nobody dies at all. Now and then, every once in a very long while, every day in a million days, when the wind stands fair and He comes to call, everybody lives.”

“Everybody lives?” Loki’s voice was tentative, cautious, nervous… Hopeful.

“Everybody lives.” Hawkeye was firm; he wasn’t quite sure why he was revealing this to Loki, but no-one else. However, Loki clearly knew more than anyone else about the situation.

“Everybody?” The Winter Soldier seemingly appeared out of nowhere, “Everybody lives? Just this once. Everybody lives?”

“Everybody lives.” Hawkeye nodded.

“Then what are we waiting here for?” The Winter Soldier asked, “DC needs us.”

“Transport.” The Black Widow countered, “Can we trust you?”

“Can I trust you? You have worked alongside the enemy for years.”

“As have you.” She challenged.

“I have been *used* by them. None of it was willing on my part. I was their weapon. Not their ally.” The Winter Soldier reminded.

“And we didn’t know.” She chided.

“Little Spider,” Loki sneered, “I may not know all the intricacies of the current situation, but I do know this, ignorance is a poor defence.”

“And what defence do *you* have for your actions?” She accused.

“None.” He was blunt, “I believed I was in the right. I believed that kneeling and serving was what you were meant for. However, I have seen much. I have learned much. I still believe that most of you were born to serve. My ignorance does not excuse. The fact that I was angry and knew that Thor is fond of this Realm was behind most of my desire to conquer it. Simply to annoy him.”

“God,” Hawkeye ran a hand over his face, “Tony really called you.”

“I am aware.” Loki smiled, “It is good to know that Midgard does not lack a Volva, even if they are of the wrong gender. Though considering he could be considered a Peace-Weaver…”

“Peace-Weaver?” Hawkeye blinked in confusion.

“Asgardian thing.” Loki waved his hands negligently.

“Brother,” Thor frowned, “You make no sense. Tony could not be deemed a Peace-Weaver, he is not…”

Whatever Thor had been going to say, it was interrupted, by Rhodey landing. Or at least a craft landing, which proved to be Rhodey when he opened the doors.

"Load up!" Rhodey instructed, "I tapped into the radio signals. Looks like our first stop is the Pentagon. Hydra are desperately trying to get into there."

"Makes tactical sense." The Black Widow lightly remarked, "From there they have control of most armed units. Possibly the ability to remotely launch missiles."

"All aboard." Hawkeye motioned.

It didn't take long for everyone to get settled and for Rhodey to take off. There wasn't a seat for a co-pilot, so all of the rest of them were together in the back.

"So, who are you, Companion of Iron Man?" Loki asked, "A Child of Time?"

"Lost," The Winter Soldier shrugged, "Lost in time. Lost *through* time. I can never go back. I can only go forwards. Running. Always running. At least I was…"

"Until He brought you home." Loki smiled.

"No. Fear brought me home." The Winter Soldier corrected, "Though He taught me things. Taught me that everyone changes. That we're all different people all through our lives. And that's okay. That's good. You've got to keep moving."

"So long as you remember all the people that you used to be." Loki agreed, "Wise words."

"Now? Now, I'm just a fly in the ointment, Loki. The monkey in the wrench. The pain in the ass." The Winter Soldier smirked.

"You aim to misbehave." Loki nodded.

"Don't I just?" The Winter Soldier laughed lightly.

"Can you fill me in on what is going on?" Loki asked, "Thor only informed me that the Man of Iron had killed the Soldier out of Time. A feat I very much doubt."

"The enemy is Hydra." The Winter Soldier supplied, "They hid within SHIELD. An old enemy. The Captain's from before. Mine from before. But they took me. Claimed me. Made me their River."

"From the Box or the Ship?"

“I suppose you could say, both.” The Winter Soldier answered after a pause, “For I was rescued. By one you could call my brother. Indeed, I do. Though not of blood. I broke their conditioning. And I was fierce in my defiance.”

“But you are His companion. You have mercy.”

“I’m River.” The Winter Soldier countered, “Check your records again.”

“You have mercy when you *want* to.” Loki grinned, “I feel I could come to enjoy your presence, River Soldier.”

“I have heard much about you, Loki Lie-Smith.” The Winter Soldier returned, “So much that I wonder who you are… You’re no Master. For all that you play the part. You are more like Mal than you would care to believe, I think.”

“I feel I should be insulted. But instead I’m strangely complimented. You see a Hero?”

“Big Damn Hero.” The Winter Soldier was firm, “The noir hero is a knight in blood caked armour. He's dirty and he does his best to deny the fact that he's a hero the whole time.”

“*That’s* what you see when you look at him?” The Falcon almost accused, “You under a rock for the whole New York thing?”

“No. Frozen.” The Winter Soldier fired back immediately, “But I’ve seen the reports. If he’d actually been *serious* about the whole thing… Well, I could give you a *dozen* better ways to go about it. So who knows how many ways he could come up with? After all, he is the Lie-Smith. The Silver-Tongue. The Deceiver.”

“You’ve done your research.” Loki commented.

“Actually, Iron Man did.” The Winter Soldier grinned, “But he left it lying around. And I like to know who I might be up against.”

“You considered that I might be your enemy?” Loki preened slightly.

“Don’t be too flattered,” The Winter Soldier shrugged, “Your report was only slightly better than Doom’s. And you *don’t* want to read Richards’. I actually had to put together my own one for him. Because it was so skewed.”

“Iron Man’s not perfect then?” The Black Widow asked.

“I’d never accuse him of that.” The Winter Soldier, “There’s more than one type of armour. He shows only what he wants people to see. Or what people want to see. I think… I was the first person in a very long time he didn’t put up at least one set of armour against.”

“Why not?” Hawkeye was curious.

“He had nothing to lose.” The Winter Soldier replied, “He literally had nothing to lose by showing me everything. He had everything to gain.”

“What’s his opinion of us?” War Machine called back, “What? I think it’s important!”

“Once he found out about Hydra, one of the first things he did was check that none of you were involved.” The Winter Soldier shrugged, “He didn’t go poking into your identities though. He thought that would make things too personal. If he knew who you were, he ran the risk of letting you know that he knew. Once he knew you were clear, he went out of his way to make sure you didn’t get hurt. He always anticipated teaming up with you eventually.”

“What about me?” The Falcon frowned, “He kidnapped me. And threatened me.”

“No,” The Winter Soldier shook his head, “He only said that you wouldn’t appreciate it. The back-up plan involved dumping you in Alaska. In a bar.”

“Would he have left me any money for a drink?” The Falcon queried.

“I don’t think that was part of the plan.” The Winter Soldier answered after a pause, “Though I could be wrong. Look, Iron Man respects you. All of you.”

“And you?” The Black Widow pressed, “You do not blame the Captain for siding with your enemy?”

“He didn’t side.” The Winter Soldier was calm, “He didn’t know. And I know *exactly* how far Hydra would go to keep their secrets. And Stevie never could keep a secret like that. He always lashed out at injustice and bullies. Never learned to keep his mouth shut so people didn’t know what we were up to. He always wore his heart on his sleeve. The only way to keep him safe… Was to keep him ignorant.”

“That’s not the man we know.” The Falcon leaned forward.

“It’s the man I knew.” The Winter Soldier countered, “I spent virtually all my childhood keeping Stevie outta trouble. I wasn’t going to let him get himself into trouble. But he managed it again. Typical.”

“How do you think people will react to finding out about Hydra?” The Falcon queried, “I presume you thought about this.”

“People don’t like to be meddled with. We tell them what to do, what to think, don't run, don't walk. We're in their homes and in their heads and we haven't the right. We're meddlesome.” The Winter Soldier replied calmly.

“You guys always bring me the very best violence.” Loki grinned, “Little River.”

“And Iron Man willingly sacrificed himself to buy you time?” The Black Widow asked, “That’s madness.”

“No, Little Spider,” Loki grinned, “It’s love in point of fact. Something a good deal more dangerous.”

“Love. You can learn all the math in the 'verse...” The Winter Soldier seemed to reminisce, “But you take a boat in the air that you don't love... She'll shake you off just as sure as the turn of the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she ought to fall down... Tells you she's hurting before she keels. Makes her a home.”

“I am a leaf on the wind,” War Machine called back to them, “Watch how I soar.”

It was vaguely familiar, Hawkeye ruminated. He’d seen this more than a few times with Steve and Tony, the pair of them bantering backwards and forwards using quotes. Sometimes he’d even joined in. If he’d known the right or even a relevant quote. But this…

It was almost painful. Because it was almost too close to how things *should* have been. All of them sitting down and talking about it. Planning together. Not this whole, flying by the seat of their pants. Keeping secrets from each other. Because he *had* to!

If he told them now that Steve was alive. There would be too many questions. Never mind if he told them about Tony. That would just complicate *everything*. They’d spend nearly an hour talking about it, before they got to actually *doing* anything.

A wailing alert cut through the vehicle. Followed by a sudden impact.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” War Machine declared, “This landing is gonna get pretty interesting.”

“Define interesting.” The Falcon almost demanded.

“Oh God, oh God, we’re all going to die?” War Machine, the Winter Soldier and Loki chorused, completely deadpan.

Hawkeye and everyone else froze at the comment.

“Don’t worry,” War Machine laughed, “I know what I’m doing.”

“This is your Captain speaking,” Jarvis came over the system, “There’s a little problem with our landing sequence. We may experience slight turbulence and then explode.”

“What?!” Bruce exclaimed.

“Keep calm, Bruce.” War Machine returned, “Jarvis has just developed a sense of humour, that’s all. Quite similar to Tony’s actually. Though this landing will be a bit tricky. Falcon, Thor, I’d advise you two to get out. The reduction in weight would help this landing.”

“How close are we to the Pentagon?” Hawkeye asked.

“We’re there.” War Machine replied.

“Falcon,” Hawkeye snapped out, “Take the Black Widow. Loki, I presume the jump won’t kill you. So you get out here too. War Machine, I’ll take the helm. You get out. Take Bruce with you. I’ll land this thing. Protect the Pentagon.”

A quick round of nods was all the agreement needed. Moments later they departed.

“Jarvis,” Hawkeye spoke as soon as he was sure he was alone, “Status?”

“Sir has just started destroying Insight, Master Clint,” Jarvis supplied, “The Captain and Agent were dropped off at the DC Office of SHIELD. They have obtained a motorbike and are making their way to the White House. I anticipate they will arrive in the next few minutes. The Captain is not obeying the laws of the road.”

“Do you seriously have any expectation that he *would* be right now?”

“You are correct, Master Clint, that is beyond my expectations. I presume you are aware of the damage this vehicle has taken from the RPG?”

“Yes. I felt the hit. Can it land?”

“Certainly, Master Clint. However, I would not count on it being able to rise again, without a mechanic’s visit. Sir, had never anticipated this vehicle being shot upon. It was designed as a personal plane prototype, intended to break the record for circumnavigating the globe on a single tank of fuel.”

“And the fact that it’s *this* big?”

“Sir got distracted half way through and decided he wanted to be able to sleep comfortably, Master Clint. He also wanted good food.”

“Enough,” Hawkeye sighed, “Let’s get this thing landed and move onto the next problem.”

“Landing in the Memorial Park, Master Clint.” Jarvis replied.

“Good.” Hawkeye nodded, “Watch out for yourself, as best you can.”

“Master Clint,” Jarvis’ voice sounded amused, “I am a program. I am not physically here. Hydra would have to know about me to harm me. And the only member of Hydra who knew about me… I dealt with him. Permanently. I am fully capable of protecting myself. As well as anyone else I care to protect.”

Hawkeye slipped out the plane.

“Exactly *when* did Tony create Skynet?… Or is it Hal?… Or the Terminator?” He pondered quietly, “And *who* did Jarvis kill? Do I need to worry yet?”

He would worry about it later. And possible ask Tony for more details. Tony would know about Jarvis killing someone. Wouldn’t he?

He pushed the thoughts aside. He had a battle to fight. And then another. And possibly more after that.

Chapter 56: Chapter 55

The Avengers weren't the only ones fighting in and around the Pentagon. There were others.

And they weren't Hydra. They were *against* Hydra.

No common uniform. But they worked as one. Clearly accustomed to fighting together.

And they easily adapted to the Avengers' presence.

Hawkeye watched as the group flowed over the security measures. The system not having a way to stop men and women who didn't follow procedure. That was what the guards were for.

And most of them weren't quite sure what to do. This wasn't exactly something they had trained for.

They didn't know who were the friends and who were the foes.

But then again, Hawkeye didn't exactly have a heads-up display there either. He was simply working on the policy that if they were trying to kill him, then they were probably not on his side.

It was working so far.

Though he wasn't quite sure what to do when he came across a small group of four huddled together in a corner. It was clear that they had a purpose, two of them standing guard, while one fiddled with a computer and the fourth watched.

Hawkeye didn't fail to notice the General's stars on the shoulders of the observer, nor the high-tech gear that the computer guy was using. Very high tech gear. As in, not yet on the market gear. As in, not long out of Tony's workshop gear.

In fact, Hawkeye was almost *positive* he'd seen that very same tablet in Tony's workshop not long after Japan.

The computer guy was messing with some wires that he had literally pried out of their casings along the corridor.

"Sir," The computer guy turned to the General, "I'm in. You're connected. Speak when you're ready."

"Thank you, Mainframe." The General nodded, before pressing on his comm unit, "Attention everyone! This is General Hawk. I am currently the highest ranking Juggler who is *not* a Hydra Agent. Technically that puts me in charge here. I am here with my people. Members of the Special Counter-Terrorist Unit Delta. Trust me when I say my people can kick your asses six ways to Sunday before breakfast. I am instructing all Hydra Agents to stand down. This is not the hill you want to die on. There is no glory here. There is no victory for you. There will be no accolades in your honour. There will be no martyrdom for you. There is only death here. And two more will not take your place, for that is not how this works. Even if you manage to best my people, the Avengers are here. And even if you manage to beat them… The Winter Soldier walks these halls right now. My people are your first and best line of defence against him. Surrender to us. And he might not kill you today. Stand down."

General Hawk released the comm link. Hawkeye nodded slightly impressed. He had heard the voice echoed. As it came not only from the man in front of him, but also over the PA system, presumably across the entire complex.

"Special Counter-Terrorist Unit Delta?" He asked, "I've not heard of you."

"We generally go by GI Joe." General Hawk replied, "And we have heard of you, Hawkeye. The work you and the Avengers have done, has been impressive."

"This attack of yours was planned." Hawkeye remarked.

"We were… Pre-warned." General Hawk shrugged slightly, "No details. Only that there were traitors. And that we were clean. I've suspected the Jugglers of dirty tricks for

quite some time. But I never thought they'd go *this* far. Hydra, of all things. It should have died with the Red Skull."

"Who warned you?" Hawkeye breathed.

"The Winter Soldier." One of the guards stated, "We thought he was there to kill the General. Only he didn't. He wasn't. I don't know why he trusted us. Only that he did."

"But he didn't." Hawkeye frowned, "He didn't tell you anything. You just said so."

"He trusted us enough to tell us that we were without traitors." Hawk countered, "He trusted us enough to let us know that there *were* traitors in the first place."

"We initially thought it was part of some scam." The other guard put in, "But we found something that supported his case. Though not what could really be classified as evidence. General, Duke is reporting that all resistance is under control and virtually ceased. The ninja are clearing up the last of the problems."

"Then we should go." Hawk declared, "Are you packed, Mainframe?"

"All done, Sir." The tech guy nodded, standing up.

"Good." Hawk nodded, "Hawkeye, are you moving with us? Or do you have your own duties to attend to?"

"If you have control here," Hawkeye replied, "We're moving to Capitol Hill. Will you be joining us for that?"

"Unlikely," Hawk sighed, "Unfortunately I don't have enough people here. We're spread a little thin. I sent my people to various important military sites across the country. They are securing those."

"A good decision." Hawkeye acknowledged, "Okay, you keep the Pentagon secure, we'll deal with the Hill."

"Agreed." Hawk nodded, "Contact us when you've got control up there."

Hawkeye dashed off, wanting to check for any further problems.

A group of the Joes were congregated in the courtyard. Apparently guarding a number of restrained people, presumably Hydra Agents. More were being escorted out to join the prisoners.

"Why here?" Hawkeye asked one of the guards.

“Because there’s nothing here they can mess up or screw with.” The reply was instant.

Hawkeye ran a considered eye over the situation. The Hydra Agents were under control and clearly defeated. There were also none among them who were fanatics. No-one who would die for the cause. At least not without orders or a leader. Somewhere along the line this group had lost their leader. Lost their head. Lost their connection to the rest of Hydra.

This was a splintered cell. A fractured cell. Without the fanatics and true believers, the rest were, as Steve would put it, bullying cowards. Perfectly tough as long as they believed they were stronger than everyone else.

Purposeful, *silent* movement caught Hawkeye’s eye. He turned to see the Winter Soldier walk into the courtyard.

A low whistle sounded, before it flicked into a high note and then ceased.

Every single one of the Joes, looked around. When each of them sighed the Winter Soldier they instantly saluted.

It was slightly comical to watch the Winter Soldier’s reaction. Though his eyes were hidden behind his goggles, the shock and horror and fear on his face was clear to see.

Hawkeye’s amusement came from the complete dichotomy of the situation. Most people would have pride in their eyes, or would be humbled by the level of respect they were being shown.

“Why?” The Winter Soldier’s whisper was easily audible in the silence, “Why do you do this?”

“We show respect to the recipient of a Medal of Honour.” One of the soldier supplied softly.

“No,” The Winter Soldier shook his head, “No. Not me. Never me. Not with all I have done. Not with all the lives I have taken. I deserve no such honour. A dishonourable

discharge at best. Leavenworth or death at worst."

"No," The soldier replied gently, "As far as we are concerned you deserve this honour and all that you are entitled to as a recipient. This is your right. Grant us the honour of showing this to you."

"No," The Winter Soldier objected again, "You don't know how many people I've killed. The innocents that died because of me. For crying out loud! I destroyed Camelot! I was on the fucking grassy knoll!"

A quick snap of fingers from one of the saluting soldiers and the soldier nearest him, pulled out what looked to be twenty dollars and handed it over. All without breaking the salute.

"That was what you were used for." The response was immediate, "It wasn't what you did. It was your hands. Your body. But not your mind or your soul or your choice. That means a lot. Others might disagree. But as far as we are concerned, you are the world's longest POW back home. Back fighting the good fight. A true Winter Soldier. Loyal in a crisis."

"I caused the crisis. It wouldn't be this bad if it wasn't for me."

"Son," General Hawk walked over, "Just give in. My men and women are more stubborn than you think. And there are more of them than you. Also they are the last to judge people due to incidents that occurred while brainwashing was in effect. They judge you on your actions that are yours and yours alone. The actions of Sergeant Barnes. Just return the salute, son. Accept that there are people who see you as a hero."

And then the General saluted, standing directly in front of the Winter Soldier.

The Winter Soldier's whole body sighed in resignation, before he pulled off a fairly sloppy salute. Clearly he was just going through the motions.

All the salutes were dropped. And everyone just carried on.

Apart from one guy, dressed all in white… Apart from the blood splatter, and *that* was going to be hell to get out, Hawkeye noted. Though Hawkeye had to give the guy points for carrying a bow and arrows, along with two swords and if Hawkeye wasn't mistaken a lot

more hidden weapons. The white-clad soldier walked straight up to the Winter Soldier and held out his hand.

"My name is Storm Shadow and I would like to formally welcome you to the Brainwash Club." He declared brazenly, "Meetings are whenever we all manage to get together. We generally spar, clean weapons, eat and chat. We do *not* drink. At least not alcohol. I have a ridiculously low alcohol tolerance and a tendency to throw edged weaponry when drunk."

"What?" The Winter Soldier stared in shock, "I don't…"

"You'll be counted as a Senior member, of course." He carried on.

"Why?" Hawkeye cut in, "He's just joining."

"We rank membership by length of time," The reply was instant, "For example, you were only a few days. So your membership would be a Junior. After you would be Snake-Eyes."

A soldier clad in black from head to toe, and wearing enough weapons to take over a small country held up his hand, presumably in acknowledgement of his name being used.

"He was controlled for a few weeks." Storm Shadow continued, "Billy was under for a few months. And I used to come in at the top with about a year and a half under my belt."

"Billy?" The Winter Soldier cocked his head.

Suddenly his arm snapped out, to intercept a foot launched at his face.

"Hey, Jimmy." Billy replied from the other end of the foot.

"Hey, Billy. These the people you said you were joining up with?" The question was calm.

"Yeah," Billy nodded, "Can I have my foot back?"

It was released and Billy shifted his weight back to standing.

“Nice catch.” Billy remarked.

“Nice kick.” The Winter Soldier returned.

“Spar again sometime?” Billy pressed.

“When we get through the rest of this.” The Winter Soldier almost promised.

“On this sad occasion we grieve with you.” Storm Shadow declared softly, as he bowed formally in the Japanese style. Billy and Snake-Eyes only moments behind.

“Do not grieve.” The Winter Soldier was firm, “Everybody lives.”

“And the Doctor Dances.” Billy grinned, “Well then, you’d best get going. What do we say to the God of Death?”

“Not today.” The Winter Soldier smiled, “And Winter is Coming.”

“You *really* like your double entendres.” A female soldier with short brown hair remarked.

“At least I ain’t being rude, Lady.” He replied.

“Just remember,” Her tone was cautionary, “Anyone can be killed.”

“I know,” He nodded, “Believe me, I’ve been used that way too many times to forget. But fear cuts deeper than swords. Do not fear for me.”

“Clutch!” The woman snapped, “Cross-Country!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Two soldiers called out immediately.

“Drive the Avengers and the Winter Soldier to Capitol Hill. Double time! And then get your butts back here!”

“You got it, Lady Jaye!” One of them drawled in a Southern accent.

(And were those long, white spats he was wearing?)

“Avengers,” Hawkeye spoke into his comm unit, “Things seem to be under control here. Meet me back outside. General Hawk’s people are providing us with transport to the Hill.”

“What happened to the jet?” The Black Widow asked.

“Kinda needs a mechanic.” Hawkeye shrugged, “Won’t fly without one fixing it.”

“Tony won’t be happy with you about that.” War Machine smirked.

“*You* were flying it!” The Falcon reminded him, “At least when things started to go wrong.”

“Tony likes me.” War Machine countered, “I’m his favourite.”

Well, not really, Hawkeye thought. But he wasn’t going to say that.

Even though it only took a short while for the Avengers to gather in the car park near the broken jet, the two Joes had managed to hotwire two jeeps.

“I can fly, remember?” The Falcon pointed out.

“Aye,” Thor rumbled, “I also do not require such transportation.”

“Best we all arrive at once.” Hawkeye declared, “When we get closer you can go ahead. But be honest Thor… Do you actually know where you’re going?”

“He gets like this sometimes.” Loki put in, “A lot of the time actually. He doesn’t think things through. You would best travel with the Little Hawk, Thunderer. Then you might actually get where you are going in a timely manner. Not get distracted by wild Bilgesnipes.”

“Bilgesnipe?” Thor looked around, “Where are they?”

“Sometimes,” Loki rubbed the bridge of his nose in exasperation, “I wonder if he was a Labrador in a past life.”

“Why is it,” War Machine looked at Loki in shock, “That Thor has been on Earth for much longer than you, but you sound more acclimatized?”

“I have always been more adaptable.” Loki shrugged.

“War Machine, Loki, Black Widow, Falcon,” Hawkeye motioned, “You take one vehicle. Thor, Winter Soldier, you’re with me. Hulk, keep pace. Okay?”

Hawkeye hoped he’d managed to balance the weight out suitably.

“Cooee!” The driver declared as they raced through the streets, “Ah do not get the system that produces these people. They ain’t got the sense God gave a rock. Who follows the belief system of a man, who hit every branch of the ugly tree when he fell out of it? To

say nothing of the fact that his elevator never went all the way to the top from what Ah understand."

"Hawkeye," Thor frowned, "I fear my All-Speak may not be fully functional. This driver, he speaks, but I do not understand him. I hear words, however they make no sense."

"No," Hawkeye grinned, "He's from the South. They say weird stuff. It makes sense to them. Just ignore it. Along with the Country Music."

It was blaring out the speakers at such a volume that Hawkeye was positively glad that he had compromised hearing. Otherwise he'd be hurting right then, what with the way it was blaring.

It was also fortunate that with Hydra attacking, most people had decided that today was not a good day to be out on the streets. The two Joe drivers, certainly weren't taking their time about getting to the Hill. In fact, they seemed to be racing each other. Counting on their passengers having a good enough grip not to fall out.

Once they were close enough, the Falcon took off to get an aerial view of the fight, which they could clearly hear ahead of them.

"You Son of a *Bitch*!" The words came through the comm units loud enough to penetrate through the Country Music, "Hawkeye, you Son of a *Bitch*! Don't even *try* to pretend you didn't know. You knew. I know you knew. Why didn't you *tell* us?"

"There'd be questions." Hawkeye replied quickly, "Questions I didn't have time to answer. And we needed to move quickly."

"You should have made time."

"I couldn't." Hawkeye was quick to counter.

"You told Loki. You told the Winter Soldier." Falcon accused.

"It is not the Little Hawk's fault if you could not understand his message." Loki declared calmly, "He spoke only the truth. You did not listen to what he said."

"Everybody lives?" Falcon snorted, "Pretty vague message."

"I thought it covered all the pertinent details." The Winter Soldier argued.

"Okay," War Machine sighed, "I'm missing something here. Fill us in."

“The Captain’s alive.” Falcon proclaimed, “Alive and fighting Hydra right now. You should see him in the next few seconds.”

And Hawkeye could *feel* the Black Widow’s glare even with the distance between them.

Fortunately, the Captain came into sight, before anyone else said anything. He was engaged in a battle with multiple Hydra agents, about a dozen tanks, apparently armed with Chitauri weaponry, and a few other armoured vehicles.

“What kept you?” His voice came clear and crisp over the comms.

“We had deal with the Pentagon first.” War Machine declared, “Surprised you haven’t cleared them all up here.”

They were all out of the jeeps and into the fight in moments. The Joe drivers didn’t even stop they simply pulled a U-turn and sped off without any discussion.

“Did the White House first.” The Captain shrugged, “Also picked up some help.”

A gust of wind and two figures materialized in the fight.

“You didn’t see that coming?” Pietro quipped, before speeding off to cause waves of chaos amongst the Hydra soldiers.

Wanda centred herself, for a moment, before joining in the fight.

Hawkeye watched as the Avengers spread themselves out to deal with the threats. They knew what to do and how to do it. They didn’t need instructions.

“Bucky…” Captain America breathed, “Why didn’t you… You could have… You *Jerk*!”

“You jump into fights, Punk. You always have. This required a more delicate touch.” The Winter Soldier replied calmly, even as he returned fire.

“And you have that touch?” Captain America fired back.

“No,” The Winter Soldier shook his head, “I pulled you out of fights. Or I stopped people from attacking you. I’m a Sergeant. Not a Captain. I’m a good Sergeant. I’m a *very* good Sergeant. I just need someone to provide a direction in which to go. And Iron Man? He’s a good leader.”

“Not a Captain?” It was a challenge.

“*You* are my Captain. But Iron Man… He forgives more than he should. What I’ve done… I shouldn’t be forgiven for. There’s no excuse. But he forgave. He… He’s got such a big heart.”

“I’ve seen it,” The Captain agreed, “It’s just… So few people do.”

“One moment!” The Winter Soldier almost *dived* under a tank, before emerging on the other side, standing upright with his fingers in his ears.

The Captain turned and ducked down, taking Wanda down with him. Sheltering her behind his Shield.

“Duck!” He yelled even as he moved.

Only moments later the tank exploded quite spectacularly; the Winter Soldier grinning broadly and clapping in the destruction. Then he was off, leaping on top of the next tank, tearing open the hatch and dropping something in. Before slamming the hatch back on and jumping clear.

That one exploded too.

“You picked up habits from Frenchie?” The Captain accused, even as he took down an armoured jeep.

“Non.” The Winter Soldier retorted quickly, a smirk on his face.

“Mais oui!” The Captain countered without pause.

Hawkeye ran an eye over the battlefield. It was virtually over. Despite the numbers being against them the Avengers, plus tag-alongs, had practically cleared the field of all opposition. There was a lot of destruction lying around. Hawkeye was seriously hoping that it wouldn't fall to him to clear it up. He *hated* clean up jobs.

They started up the steps, there was the rest of the building to clear. But Hawkeye didn't anticipate much trouble. After all, how many weapons could they be hiding in there?

"Sputnik." The word was snapped out, clear and precise.

And also totally baffling.

But Hawkeye didn't have time to think about it. Because the Winter Soldier went down, without being touched, immediately afterwards.

Chapter 57: Chapter 56

“Bucky!” The Captain shouted, dashing to his Sergeant’s side.

Hawkeye’s head turned as if on a swivel looking for the source of the attack.

He narrowed his eyes, as he saw a shadow that was the wrong shape. Just slightly off, but nothing was too insignificant. It was in the shadow of one of the columns at the top of the stairs.

“There!” He pointed.

Everyone started to move, but then the voice snapped out again.

“Mercury’s Messenger.”

This time it was Pietro who dropped. He was the closest to the columns. He tumbled down the stairs towards them. Wanda dashing towards him, catching him, so he didn’t fall any further.

“I wouldn’t try anything, Scarlet Witch.” The voice instructed, “One word and I can stop your brother’s heart.”

“Who… Who are you?” Her voice shook.

A group of three moved out from behind a pillar.

The blood drained from Hawkeye’s face.

It was Alexander Pierce peering over a shoulder, and Senator Stern pointing a gun at a head.

And the figure in the middle, unarmed and unprotected was Tony. One of his arms was probably twisted up behind his back. He was dressed in long sleeves and a band t-shirt, judging by the free arm that hung loosely down by his side. Clearly dressed for comfort, not show. It was a striking contrast between the formal attire of the politicians.

"Don't try anything." Stern instructed, "He has no value to us."

"Oh, he has value," Pierce disagreed, "But if we're going down, we're taking him with us. You have ruined my plans."

"Why?" The Captain breathed, "Why do this?"

"Why not?" Pierce laughed, "Building a better world sometimes means tearing the old one down. I can bring order to the lives of seven billion people, by sacrificing 20 million. Is that not a better world?"

"Security for freedom." The Captain countered, "That's what you're offering."

"The world would have accepted it." Stern pointed out, "Everything we've done… It's been for the world."

"No," The Black Widow snapped, "It's been for your *idea* of the world."

"What did you do to Pietro?" Wanda demanded.

"You didn't think we gave you those powers for free did you, Scarlet Witch?" Pierce laughed, "We had to be sure you couldn't turn against us. Little commands. Little phrases. Programed into your heads. Anytime, anywhere we can take you out. Take you down. We aren't stupid. We knew there was a chance you'd turn against us. But we have experience in breaking men. Men a lot tougher than you and your brother. We broke Sergeant Barnes. Made him our Winter Soldier. He was… His work has been a gift to mankind. He shaped the century. We have too much invested in him to lose him now."

"Why him?" The Falcon pressed.

"Do you have any idea how many men we put through the Super Soldier process? How many times we tried? Sergeant Barnes may not have been a complete success. He certainly wasn't a Red Skull or a Captain America. But he was the closest we ever came. He was the only person who ever survived the process with anything enhanced, who was still controllable. Still useable. He has been a most useful asset over all these years. Until Iron Man came along. However, we can rescue the situation. We can retrain him. We've done it before."

"You don't need Tony." War Machine pointed out, "Let him go."

“He’s still useful,” Pierce sneered, “We’ve gotten a lot of use out of Mister Stark. Not as much as we hoped. Not as much as we expected. And not as much as we got out of Howard. But a great deal of us.”

“Tony would never help you!” War Machine snarled.

“He didn’t have to be aware of it, for us to use him.” Pierce smirked, “His weapons were a boon to the world. A boon to our plans. We didn’t even have to talk Stane into the illegal deals. He was so eager to make money. I personally thought he was overreacting when he decided to kill off the Golden Goose. But it wasn’t worth interfering. And the fear in the world increased when it was believed that Mister Stark was dead. After all, if insurgents could get to *him*, no-one was safe. When he came back the fear decreased, but I wasn’t worried. I had faith that he would be incensed by his imprisonment and rally with better weapons to destroy his enemy.”

“But he didn’t.” Steve’s voice was soft, but loud enough to be heard.

And it was Steve talking. It was Captain America in appearance. But Steve who was speaking.

“He didn’t.” Steve repeated, “He came back and he tried to make the world a better place. He decided to protect, not attack. To defend, not strike. He decreased the fear again. He made the world a better place.”

“He became a nuisance.” Pierce countered, “Not enough to be dealt with. Just an annoying fly. Easily ignored when a larger problem presented itself. Iron Man… He *is* a problem. Not a small one either. He created fear and panic at first. But after his announcement… Everything got calmer. People stopped being so scared. Because they believed *he* would protect them. Of all the stupid, inane things to believe. Of all the stupid, inane things to get in the way of Hydra! But we never forgot Mister Stark. We had to keep an eye on him. He always had the potential to be a threat. He almost became one. When he hacked SHIELD. Some people were worried that he had gotten into our files as well. Of course we cleared that up. He was so busy looking for funeral details that he *completely* missed our files.”

Somehow, Hawkeye doubted that.

“He’s not as smart as Howard was. He actually came close to finding out. He figured out that money was going missing. That we’d cooked the books. We made sure that he never got any closer. The Winter Soldier was quite useful in that regard.”

“Howard Stark died in a car crash.” The Black Widow declared.

“For every assassination attributed to the Winter Soldier,” Pierce grinned, “There is at least an equal number of deaths at his hand, that were ruled as other causes. Sometimes it did not serve our cause for a death to be noticed. For a death to be celebrated. Sometimes a quiet, discrete end was what was needed. We have lived in the shadows for so many years. We know the value of discretion. But Iron Man has forced our hand. Hydra will rise victorious. You cannot stop us, Captain.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.” The Captain returned evenly.

“I know you are capable of deception.” Pierce’s grin became evil, while his tone became almost… Kind, “That you are capable of lying to a man you see virtually every day. But you never told him who you really were. That you befriended him on the orders of SHIELD. So that they could keep a close eye on him. That everything that happened from then was a lie. That you *married* him as a part of that lie. Did you know that, Mister Stark? Did you know who the great Captain America was to you? Did you know that he was always your husband?”

Stern was stroking Tony’s cheek with the gun barrel, almost as if trying to offer some sort of comfort.

It was a clear attempt to turn Tony towards their cause. Making him easier to handle for the Hydra Agents. Hawkeye wasn’t even sure that it wouldn’t have worked, had Tony not already known the truth.

“You know,” Tony’s voice was set, firm, confident, “There’s one question no-one has ever asked me. No one… They should have. People ask me: “What happened in Afghanistan?” I was captured and tortured by the Ten Rings. People ask me: “What did they want?” They wanted me to build them a Jericho missile. People ask me: “How did you get away?” I killed them all and escaped… But no one ever asks me… They never ask what I *built* in that cave to kill them all with.”

Hawkeye cast his gaze around again. It was clear that a lot of people were confused as to why Tony was saying what he was saying. But Hawkeye could see the sparkle of mischief in his eyes. The sheer enjoyment in his eyes. He was having fun.

“Some people say I built a gun. Other people say I built a bomb.” Tony continued, “They had guns. If I had built a gun, I would have killed some of them. But they would have

killed me, before I killed all of them. And I killed all of them."

There was no pride in Tony's voice. Only a statement of fact.

"And I was in a cave. If I had built a bomb, I stood as good a chance of killing myself as well as them. I wasn't keen on dying. And even if I were… The man who saved my life didn't deserve to die.

"So I didn't build a gun. And I didn't build a bomb. I built what Howard had taught me to build all those years ago. Only he taught me to make it out of fabric and words and brain-power and attitude. And I made it out of metal and wires and computer chips and my own blood, sweat and tears. And it still wasn't enough. I couldn't protect the only man worth anything in that cave. He was a far better man than I will ever be. He had nothing and everything. Only he had nothing. He just used to have everything.

"Instead of taking it out on me. He chose to give me life. Give me hope. And give me a challenge. He saved my soul. When I came back… I wasn't who I had been. I didn't create weapons of fire and brimstone. I didn't go seeking revenge. Justice was what I was after…

"But as I was saying. I built something in that cave in Afghanistan. I built what I had learned as a child. Only better. Howard taught me to build a mask. I didn't build a mask; I didn't build *just* a mask. There was one other lesson that has stuck with me all these years that was rather suited to the occasion.

"Stark Men are made of Iron."

Something red and gold flashed in the corner of Hawkeye's eye, before shooting past him.

Tony had already lifted his free hand towards them… No, towards *it*!

Hawkeye watched as it snapped onto Tony's hand, seemingly growing in length to cover more arm than it initially appeared it should. Though he couldn't be sure, it had been moving

so fast.

And so was Tony.

With a now-armoured hand he twisted towards Stern slightly and tore the gun from the Senator's grip. Crushing it, before tossing it away.

"Stark Men *are* Iron."

Tony lifted his foot slightly, the opposite one to the now armoured hand. Another flash of red and gold swooped down to encase the foot.

Tony leaned forward slightly and kicked backwards, even as he continued to twist his arm out of Pierce's grip. A controlled blast from the armoured hand, knocked Pierce to the floor.

Tony's newly-freed arm stretched out and was quickly encased by another flying piece of armour. The boot and the original gauntlet fired up and Tony flew back towards the Avengers, even as the second gauntlet fully deployed. The other boot latched on mid-flight, as did various other parts.

Until, as Tony landed, there was only the face-plate missing.

He held out his hand, catching the golden piece as it flew towards him.

"And I," He brought the face-plate to its rightful position, "Am Iron Man."

Chapter 58: Chapter 57

The last few words were said through the armour. In the voice that all the Avengers had heard before. The voice of Iron Man.

"No… No…" Stern stammered, tripping over his own feet as he tried to scrabble away from them.

"I cannot believe you just *did* that!" The Winter Soldier exclaimed, already restraining Pierce.

"What?" Iron Man protested.

"Monologue!" The Winter Soldier fired back, "I *know* that's in the Evil Overlord Handbook. In the Do *Not* Do section!"

The Winter Soldier had one hand inside Pierce's mouth, before removing it and crushing what was in his grasp.

"I was trying to buy time." Iron Man retorted.

"I still can't believe you made me read that thing." The Winter Soldier sighed slightly, "Along with the Hero's Handbook, the Side-Kick's Handbook and the *Henchperson's* Handbook. I am *not* a Henchperson! I never was. But *you* with your dramatic one liners. With your posing. With your speeches. What are you *doing*?"

"I'm not an Evil Overlord." Iron Man countered.

"It's in the Hero's book too." The Winter Soldier sing-songed.

"I'm not a Hero." Iron Man reminded.

"Tony?" Rodney was the first to get his voice back, "Tony? What? What the…? What the *hell*? You said you didn't know…"

"I said I was never told." Iron Man's voice wasn't apologetic, "I wasn't. Look, let's talk about this later. Briar, you got Pierce?"

"Ready for transport," The Winter Soldier squatted down to get in Pierce's face, "I win, Pierce. *This* is my gift to the world. *This* is how I chose to shape the world. You took

everything from me."

"Sputnik"" Pierce managed to get out, blood spurting out as he spoke, "Sputnik!"

"Won't work," The Winter Soldier declared smugly, "I got your little Words out of my head. That one and all the others. Even the ones you never knew about. I'm not stupid. And Tony? He's not as smart as Howard was. He never was. He's *smarter*. And a hundred times the man Howard was. You took everything from me. Tony gave it back. Simply because he could."

"Deploy!" Pierce shouted, "Deploy the droids! Activate Golem!"

He never got any further. The Winter Soldier dug his fingers into Pierce's ear and removed a small comm unit. He then crushed it in his hand.

"Damn it!" He snarled, "Incoming, Brat! Steve!"

"I got high." Iron Man declared rocketing upwards.

"I got low." The Winter Soldier drew one of his guns.

"What?" Hawkeye was looking for the enemy.

"The drones." The Winter Soldier stated, "Hammer Drones."

"Hammertech?" The Black Widow scoffed, "It is nothing to fear. We dealt with some of them earlier."

"They're what we fought in the warehouse district, isn't it?" The Captain slipped his Shield onto his arm.

"Yes." The Winter Soldier nodded.

"How did Hammer get repulsors?" War Machine asked as he joined Iron Man in the air.

"*You* let him tinker with *my* Suit." Iron Man accused quickly, "Steve, remind me later to have Pep sue Hammer. I patented that design. He's infringing on my copyright! Several of them actually!"

"You seriously patented it?" The Falcon demanded, "And no-one *noticed*?!"

"I did it in pieces." Iron Man replied, "And there's tricks to the system. Ways to slip things through, hide things… Speed things up. If you know what you're doing. And I've filed a *lot* of patents."

“Any tips on where to hit?” Hawkeye cut to the chase.

“Weak points are the joints,” Iron Man declared, “And the neck. But you need a high angle shot to get above the neck guard. The Arc-Reactor, which I will *also* be suing him over, is faulty. Old style tech. Which is odd considering that War Machine’s reactor is newer than that. However, it does mean that the reactor can be overloaded. Thor, that’s your best shot. It’ll take a lot of juice. But it *can* happen. Go wild. See what you can do. Everyone else, be warned, they might explode.”

“The main processing unit and visual sensors are in the head.” The Winter Soldier added, “Decapitation should take them out.”

“Rhodey,” Iron Man carried on, “Your big gun… You should be able to zipper them.”

“I know, I used it before.” War Machine spun to face him, “I *tried* that on *you*!”

“Gold Titanium Alloy,” Iron Man countered, “I’m a fair bit tougher than them. Hammer compromised strength to reduce the weight. It was cheaper that way. And the Drones aren’t protecting squishy humans.”

“Three types.” The Winter Soldier put in, “Air, Sea and Land. But pretty much all the same.”

“Hammer never has had much imagination.” Iron Man sounded almost remorseful, “Here they come! Jarvis! Protocol Terracotta Army!”

“Of course, Sir.” Jarvis’ calm tones replied.

The ground shook beneath the Drones’ feet as they landed.

For a moment the two sides simply regarded each other. Then the fight began.

Hawkeye was only peripherally aware of the others’ movements. He was far too in the fight for his liking. He had always been a long range combatant above all else. And he wasn’t in Overwatch right then.

“Hey, Reindeer Games!” Iron Man called out, “That illusion trick of yours… I can see through it. Either tighten it up. Or try something else.”

“This better, Lost One?” Loki returned.

“Much,” Iron Man declared, “Like your style with the knives. Much more you than that flashy staff.”

“You didn’t like the staff?” Loki teased.

“Messed with my head.” The Winter Soldier remarked, “Not good.”

“Prefer the knives.” Iron Man agreed, “Oh… I know, you could use some knuckle-daggers. Those would be up your street.”

“We are not giving the slightly psychopathic Asgardian ideas, brat!” The Winter Soldier reprimanded.

“I’m not a psychopath,” Loki returned, “I’m a high functioning sociopath. Do your research.”

“Nah,” Iron Man fired back, “You’re not either. You’re actually far *too* empathic for your own good. You’re an Indigo Child.”

“Then, you are either a Crystal or a Star.” Loki reminded, “Watch your left.”

“Another time, Ladies!” The Captain was firm, “War Machine, careful with your shots. You came a little close to friendly fire just then.”

“It wasn’t me.” War Machine was slightly frantic, “I’m… I’m not in control. I’m not in *control*! I’ve been hacked! Tony! Tony!”

“Hold on a moe, Honey-bun.” Iron Man threw back, “Tied up right now.”

And it was true. Most of the aerial Hammer Drones were targeting Iron Man. It was clear that they perceived him as the greater threat.

War Machine, on the other hand, was being used as a weapon against the Falcon and Thor. Both clearly recognised as threats to Hydra’s domination of the sky. The Falcon was having greater success dodging War Machine’s attacks, as he was able to move in all three dimensions. With Thor only really able to travel in straight lines and parabolas, he was far more restricted, and thus an easier target.

It was not surprising that Thor took a shot. Normally he would have been able to shrug off such a blow. But it was clearly much stronger than War Machine had ever produced before, as it knocked the Asgardian to the ground unconscious.

“Thor!” The cry went out immediately.

Iron Man turned in a tighter spin than Hawkeye had ever seen, as he dived towards Thor’s prone body.

“Brat!” The Winter Soldier put in, “War Law twelve!”

“Hold on a *moe*!!” Iron Man fired back.

He landed down in front of Thor, grabbing Mjolnir from the slack grip of the Asgardian.

“Heads up!” Iron Man threw the Hammer towards the Winter Soldier.

The Winter Soldier dropped his guns and caught the Hammer. Then he started wielding it, albeit clumsily.

“This thing needs a longer handle!” He declared, “It’s too heavy to use one-handed.”

“Thor never seems to have any problems!” The Captain reminded.

“He’s Asgardian!” The Winter Soldier countered.

“Take your complaint up with the Dwarves Sindri and Brokkr.” Loki stated, “They made the thing.”

“Do they have a complaints’ line I can call?” The Winter Soldier inquired.

“Not that I know of.” Loki shrugged.

“Jarvis, how we doing on the Army?” Iron Man demanded.

“It will take a few minutes longer, Sir.” Jarvis replied, “Approximately three.”

“We don’t have three minutes, Jarvis!” Iron Man snapped.

“Tony!” War Machine called out again.

“Give me two!” Iron Man threw back, “Everyone down!”

Hawkeye dove for the ground. He wasn't the only one. Anyone with any sense was doing the same. Looking out from the corner of his eyes, he saw red light erupt from Iron Man's hands, which were spun around to take out every single one of the ground forces.

"Loki, watch Thor a moment." Iron Man commanded, even as he took off.

He swooped close to War Machine, completely ignoring the Drones on his tail.

"War Machine." Iron Man snapped, "Override Dorlf. Pass Phrase: Words in the heart cannot be taken."

The light went out from War Machine. His Arc Reactor and eyes were extinguished. He dropped like a rock.

Fortunately, Iron Man had clearly anticipated this as he was prepared and caught his friend.

"What would you do without me, Honey-bear?" Iron Man sighed, "Briar, keep them off me."

He landed carefully and deposited War Machine down.

"He'll be alright in a bit." Iron Man declared, "System's rebooting and installing a new operating system. Hey, Jarvis, how much longer?"

"Approximately one minute, thirty seconds, Sir."

"Well, then," Hawkeye could *hear* the grin in Tony's voice, "Let's play follow the leader."

"March!" The Winter Soldier called out.

"You got it!" Iron Man positively chirped, even as he took off.

Drums started to roll from Iron Man's speakers, before being joined by bagpipes. It didn't sound like the sort of music that Tony would enjoy. Then the words began… And Hawkeye changed his mind.

Any song that had the line "How many of them can we make die?" sounded right up Iron Man's alley right then.

Iron Man was soaring though the sky, the remaining Hammer Drones soaring after him, like a group of demented ducklings.

The Avengers were laying down what fire they could, trying to take out the Drones, but Iron Man wasn't even trying. His only objective seemed to be staying ahead of his following flock.

Suddenly the Drones all stopped firing on Iron Man.

"Apologies for the delay, Sir." Jarvis declared, "I have control."

"What kept you, Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"It appears that Hammer has managed to hire someone with more than a modicum of ability, Sir." Jarvis replied, "The firewalls were a larger problem than I anticipated, then I had to patch together the pieces of code that were originally stolen. Surprisingly there were more lines of stolen code than we anticipated. Although they were arranged well. This was no script-kiddie, Sir. For all that they were making use of your code."

"Find their name and send a recruitment package, Jarvis." Tony instructed.

"Of course, Sir." Jarvis agreed, "Anything in particular you would like me to do with the Terracotta Army?"

"Send them home to destroy everything." Tony stated.

Iron Man descended from the sky and landed next to the Avengers.

“Tones?” War Machine had gotten back up, fully functional, “What the fuck? How the…?”

“I told you,” Tony’s visor slid up, “I don’t build anything that can be used against me anymore. I built backdoors into everything. Besides… War Machine is the retrofitted Mark Two.”

“Dare I even *ask* what number you’re up to right now?” Hawkeye asked.

“Life, the Universe and Everything.” Tony shrugged.

“If that means what I think it means.” The Captain put in, “Then we need to have a *serious* talk.”

And that wasn’t something Hawkeye knew about, so he would simply ignore it for now.

A movement caught his eye, he turned his head.

Then Hawkeye moved, drawing his bow, even as Iron Man flew backwards, uncontrolled in his flight.

Stern had gotten hold of one of the Hydra guns. He had shot at Tony.

“At least I can end the Starks.” Stern snarled.

Chapter 59: Chapter 58

Well, he wasn't getting a second shot. Not with Hawkeye's arrow in his right shoulder and the Black Widow's bullet in the left. Widow moving towards Stern to restrain him.

Turning, Hawkeye saw Thor and the Captain gathered around Iron Man's body. There was a clank as Thor flipped him onto his back.

"He's not moving." Steve whispered, "The Reactor… It's…"

The Arc Reactor was unlit. None of the strangely comforting light shining.

Thor tore off the faceplate, tossing it negligently to one side. Steve's hand immediately went to Tony's cheeks.

"He's still breathing." Steve slumped with relief, "We need to get the armour off him."

"Leave that to me, Captain." Thor declared.

"No!" The Winter Soldier interrupted, "You tear it off him, you'll do more harm than good. Get out my way, Stevie. I can do it."

The push that he gave to Steve wasn't unkind or even hard, but it was insistent. Steve willingly surrendered his place, even as the Winter Soldier started to move the armour's arm upwards.

"Tell me where." Steve instructed, "I can help."

"No you can't." The Winter Soldier shook his head, "Brat fingerprint locked them. I'm the only one."

"That's your metal hand," Hawkeye pointed out, "It doesn't have prints."

“Do you honestly believe,” The Winter Soldier cocked an eyebrow, “That the brat, *wouldn’t* give me fingerprints? Just because?… Got it!”

One of the sleeves of the armour starting collapsing down towards the glove, the Winter Soldier pulled the glove off easily. Before moving to the other side and shifting Tony’s arm upwards to reach into the armpit.

“Why just you?” Steve asked.

“Safer.” The Winter Soldier replied, even as he was removing the other glove.

Hawkeye could see the disappointment on Steve’s face, he wasn’t trying to hide it.

“Ah hell, Stevie! Not like that! Safer for *you*!” And there was Bucky in the face and tone, “The Brat knew that if he ever got caught people would think you were in on it. Fingerprints would just seal the deal. Without it, there was a chance of you managing to get out of guilt by association. Because they couldn’t *prove* anything.”

“He didn’t know?” The Widow blinked.

“Made sure he didn’t.” The Winter Soldier declared, “I’ve been playing interference between the two of you since I got my head screwed on straight enough to know who you were.”

“Why?” Hawkeye asked.

“Lots of reasons.” The Winter Soldier shrugged, “Mostly because I *could*. Stevie, give me a hand. I need to lift the chest-plate upwards. I need to see the Reactor.”

“Canst thou not see it now, Winter Warrior?” Thor pointed.

“That’s the auxiliary.” The response was crisp, “The Brat ain’t a fool. He told me it went out during New York. So he changed the suits so there’s a backup. Only if it’s gone out… I want to see what that power spike did to the central one.”

“Shouldn’t you remove the headpiece first?” Barton pressed.

“No.” This time it was Sam who answered, “It’s stabilizing the neck. Leave it till we know more. I got it, Briar. On three?”

“Not to you.” The Winter Soldier’s voice almost snapped, “I’m not Briar to you.”

“That’s cool.” Sam held his hands up in surrender, “On three?”

“One. Two. Three.”

Between Steve, Rhodey and the Winter Soldier the chest-plate was easy to remove. Sam had positioned himself so that he could see the chest area underneath first.

Barton could see that the shot had caused some internal damage. Although the Armour had appeared undamaged from the outside, there was shrapnel and significant damage to the inside. It seemed that the first layer of the armour was intact, but nothing else was.

“This is beyond me.” Sam held his hands up in surrender, “I’m an EMS at a pinch. I ain’t touching this.”

“Better than me.” Rhodey clanked slightly as he knelt down, “I only know when to call for help. I’d be calling for you. All I know is how to stop the bleeding and immobilise limbs… And that’s from dealing with him through college. Any luck with the Hulk?”

“Lullaby isn’t exactly working.” Barton replied, “I think he’s too riled up about the shot.”

“We need *someone*!” Steve stressed, “And we can’t trust SHIELD right now. I don’t know all the safe names.”

“I got it.” The Winter Soldier pulled out a phone, “Hey Billy, it’s Jimmy… Could you ask your General if I can borrow a medic or two?… Where? Hold on.”

He looked at the Avengers.

“Safe location?” He asked, “Not the Tower.”

“Folly?” Steve cocked an eyebrow.

“Folly.” Barton nodded in agreement.

“Folly.” Rhodey added his agreement.

“You know the Folly?” The Winter Soldier queried, “Good. Thought he might have told you. We’ll meet you there. Also send someone to pick-up two packages. High priority. High value. Ten-eight.”

He hung up.

"Shield Brothers," Thor frowned, "I do not understand. How can a man's foolishness reference a place? A man may make many mistakes in many different places. How come you all know the same one?"

"A Folly can also refer to a particular type of building." Coulson declared as he approached them, "Though I do not know of any in the nearby vicinity."

"It's not the usual kind of folly." Steve shrugged, "Where's the plane?"

"Above." Coulson pointed, "He never bothered to land it."

"He rarely does." The Winter Soldier shrugged, "Jarvis, we need to move."

"Understood, Master Jimmy." Jarvis' voice came over the comms clearly, "I am positioning the Bus above you. Opening the back door. If you would care to come aboard."

Glancing upwards Barton could see the opened back hatch of the plane. Though he couldn't see the rest of the plane, so it was slightly disturbing.

"I'll require a lift." The Winter Soldier stated, "Three pointer, on my right. Gather the rest up as well."

"Of course, Master Jimmy. At your command." Jarvis responded.

"Hulk carry Tin Man Shiny Heart." Hulk declared firmly, even as he picked Tony up.

"You sure, big guy?" Barton asked, "It'll be a bumpy ride."

"Hulk keep Tin Man Shiny Heart safe." Hulk growled defensively.

"Easy," The Winter Soldier held up his hands, "I know you will. He's your friend, right?"

"Right."

"Can you take two extras?" The Winter Soldier pressed, "If they hung on around your neck? Just to get aboard?"

"Okay." The Hulk nodded.

“Hawkeye, Agent.” The Winter Soldier snapped, “That’s your ride. Falcon, you’re carrying Widow. Thor, pick up Pietro. Wanda, climb on Thor’s back. I presume you can handle that Thor?”

“Verily!” Thor intoned, as he picked up the speedster.

“You want us too?” Wanda stared.

“Sweetheart,” The Winter Soldier drawled, “I’ve been where you’ve been. And I was there for longer. As well as being unwilling. I’m keeping an eye on you, until I *know* that you’ve seen someone to get your heads on straight. I *told* you where to go and you ignored me.”

“How can you be sure?” She challenged.

“Because otherwise your brother wouldn’t be out for the count.” The Winter Soldier countered, “Instead you’ve been dashing all over the world saving lives and not thinking past the moment you’re in. Living in the seconds. You need to plan ahead. You’re not planning to fail. You’re just failing to plan. Steve, you’re with me. Loki… Do you have transport options or are you going to need a lift?”

“Given the distance,” Loki eyed it carefully, “I will require assistance.”

“War Machine,” The Winter Soldier instructed, “You’re with Loki. Jarvis, ready when you are.”

The discarded pieces of the Iron Man armour sprang to life. Most racing towards the plane, but three pieces turned towards the Winter Soldier. In moments he was booted and gloved, albeit on only one hand.

“Stevie,” The Winter Soldier pointed, “On the boots. Everyone else… Move it!”

Riding the Hulk wasn’t the most comfortable ride, Barton had ever had. But it wasn’t the worst. Once inside the plane the Hulk immediately retreated to the back of the cargo bay, clearly trying to keep Tony as safe as possible.

As soon as everyone was aboard the doors started to close and the plane began to move, quickly building up to a fast pace. The group made their way to a more comfortable part of the plane. Where the Hulk finally agreed to set Tony down.

Rhodey, Steve and the Winter Soldier did what they could to staunch the bleeding. Barton and the rest kept out the way.

"Brother," Thor turned to Loki, "How didst thou know? When?"

"Know what?" Loki raised an eyebrow in reply.

"That the Man of Iron was the Heart Child?"

"I have known since the very first time I encountered both of them." Loki returned, "As you should have."

"There was no sign, Brother." Thor countered.

"Except for the most obvious one." Loki sighed, "One day I will lay my hands on our Tutors and reek my vengeance upon them."

"For what?" Barton stared.

"For unleashing an intellectual *cripple* into the Realms." Loki declared, "The evidence was clear to see. *If* you looked. You believe that you know everything. And that which you do not know is not important. I know more than you can even perceive. I perceive more than you can even imagine."

Personally Barton thought Loki was exaggerating; having a hyper-inflated view of his own intelligence.

"What did I miss, Brother?"

"Look and See." Loki instructed.

"I see nothing that could have revealed this to me earlier, Brother." Thor stated.

"By Odin's Eye!" Loki's gaze was sent heavenwards, "You are blinder than he is. Let me *show* you!"

With that Loki grabbed Thor's wrist and dragged him over to where Tony was lying.

Clint wasn't ashamed to admit that he tensed with Loki so close to the vulnerable form of his best friend.

But all Loki did was hold Thor's hand out over the Arc Reactor.

"I have seen this before." Thor reminded, "I live in his home, Brother."

"You see, but you do not observe. So *observe*!" Loki demanded, "Look with the same skill that allows you to summon Mjolnir. I know you are capable. Though those lessons were a long time ago."

Thor closed his eyes, and a frown came over his usually smiling features.

Then he snatched his hand from Loki's grasp even as his eyes snapped open.

Loki merely smiled in reply. He watched as Thor stretched out his hand once again to hover over the Arc Reactor.

"How?" Thor's voice was filled with awe and fear, "He should be dead."

"What?" Steve's tone had a threatening edge alongside the shock.

"Peace," Thor held his hands up in surrender, "I mean no harm. You know that, Steve. It is simply… That power is not for mortals to hold. Nor should it even exist."

"What are you saying?" Sam frowned, "You're not making any sense."

"What the oaf is *trying* to say," Loki took over, "Is that he can sense the Tesseract within the Arc Reactor."

"That make sense." Rhodey shrugged, "I don't know all the workings… But Tony told me that the original Arc Reactor was developed due to studying the Tesseract. Of course it would be similar."

"Nay," Thor shook his head, "Your reactor is similar. A pale reflection of the Tesseract's power. Much as the moon reflects the sun. This… This is a child. A second Tesseract… Weaker, it is true. But still far more power than a mortal should be able to bear. Even I would not dare to try. The Tesseract and its counterparts are far too dangerous to so much as touch."

"Counterparts?" Coulson leaned forward slightly.

“You do not know of the Infinity Stones?” Thor blinked in surprise.

“They would not ask if they knew,” Loki sighed, “And it is not exactly common knowledge amongst the people of Asgard. Only the most educated and highly ranked know about the Stones. Six stones of power. Each controlling one aspect. Space. Power. Reality. Mind. Time. Soul. The Tesseract is the Space Stone. You have seen what it can do.”

“I presume the Mind Stone acts in a similar way to your mind-control trick.” Barton snapped.

“No, Little Hawk.” Loki returned, “That was not my trick. My staff *contained* the Mind Stone. What Selvig perceived as being the Tesseract causing enlightening, was in fact the Mind Stone.”

“But you were not destroyed by it.” Coulson accused.

“I was not touching the Stone itself.” Loki reminded, “Merely the equipment to allow me to use it. Just as the Stone never touched anyone I used it against. That is far too dangerous. For a mortal to merely touch one of the Infinity Stones…”

“The Stone will consume them.” Thor put in, “Destroying them from the inside out.”

“I’ve seen it.” Steve shuddered, “No one can hold them?”

“Beings of immense power themselves may, for a while.” Thor conceded, “Even a group of those with lesser power may. However eventually all are destroyed.”

“Then why try?” The Black Widow asked.

“For the ability to wield the Power of the Stone, Little Spider,” Loki chided, “You should not be amazed by the risks beings are willing to take. Your species is not special in that regard.”

“While our Tony does not hold the Tesseract itself,” Thor continued, “He hold more than enough of its power to destroy him many times over. I have never heard of any Mortal managing to hold a Stone for even a second.”

“Then you have not been listening.” Loki declared, “I would wager that Tony has. Also there is the Star Lord.”

“I have not heard of a Lord of the Stars.” Thor frowned, “What Realm is he from?”

“Midgard.” Loki was smug, “Of this planet originally. Though he left many years ago. From what I have heard he held the Power Stone for nearly a full minute on his own, before he was joined by three of the other four Guardians of the Galaxy. Together they even managed to *use* the Stone to destroy Ronan the Accuser.”

“An impressive feat,” Thor agreed, “Though I am surprised that you learned of it, Brother.”

“I have my reasons to pay attention,” Loki defended himself, “I am surprised that the All-Father allows you to be as blind as you are… But, to the matter at hand. The Arc Reactor was developed from the Tesseract. By Howard Stark, I presume.”

“Predominately, yes.” Coulson admitted, “It took many years for SHIELD to obtain the Tesseract even after his death. Mister Stark would never let it leave his care.”

“Oh, I believe he did.” Loki smirked, “I believe he left it in his lab one day. And a particularly curious little boy came across it and picked it up. Wondering, perhaps, what it was. And for some reason the Tesseract chose not to destroy him. Instead… You could say it blessed him. Made him capable of withstanding the burden of the Tesseract and the other Stones. Granted him a defence against my control of the Mind Stone.”

“You tried to…” Barton breathed.

“Yes,” Loki was unashamed, “Once I realized who he was, I planned to turn him against you. To use his identity against you. When I realized that he was immune… Everything changed. Or at least that was when everything *started* to change. He changed me. Those last words that the Iron Man said to me…”

“Wait,” Sam frowned, “Which words?”

“Marilyn Munroe’s statement.” The Black Widow explained, “About who deserved her.”

“I realized that Asgard never deserved me.” Loki replied, “They couldn’t handle me at my worst. So why did they deserve my best? I don’t want Asgard’s throne. Let them have the ruler they want. Let them have the leader they deserve. I’ll sit and watch. I’ll sit and laugh. Because without a moderating influence Thor will take Asgard to war and destruction. And I was meant to be that moderating influence. I was meant to be the puppet master behind the scenes. But only a puppet myself. A puppet on strings that Odin formed all those years ago. A slave of my upbringing. No… I will be the Doctor. I will run.”

“Just don’t destroy them all.” Barton put in, “They don’t deserve that.”

“No,” Loki agreed, “Let them live with their consequences. Let them reap what they have sown. But I will not be their reaper. They don’t deserve that. And I don’t deserve that on my conscious.”

“Hold on,” Rhodey frowned, “Back to the main topic… Tony has Tesseract power?”

“Yes.” Loki nodded.

“And you think the Tesseract gave it to him?” Rhodey pressed, “Can it even do that?”

“I believe so.” Loki nodded again, “It’s a long held belief by those knowledgeable of the Mystic Arts that the Stones are more than mere items. That they have an intelligence of their own. However, this is the first time there has been anything approaching proof. I don’t think it simply gave him power though… I think it enhanced his intelligence. I think it made

him capable of understanding the Tesseract… The Stones… The Power they contain. How to use it. How to replicate it."

"Why?" Steve asked.

"Because everyone who has ever picked up the Stones has wanted to use them," Loki explained, "Those mortals who have survived them, they did not wish to use them. Although the Star Lord did. It was not his original intent. Perhaps the Stones bless those who do not wish to enslave them."

"But you don't know." Steve was firm.

"I cannot be sure." Loki agreed, "All I *can* be sure about is that your husband contains a fraction of the Tesseract's power. A Tesseract child. It has not changed who or what he is. But whether you believe that it up to you."

"He's my Tony." Steve spat, "No matter what. I don't know all the details right now. But I will get them, Bucky!" There was a thread of a threat in the name, "And I don't care *what* you tell me, Loki. I still love him. I can take him at his worst. I gave him my heart a long time ago. And I'm not asking for or taking it back."

"We'll see." Loki shrugged, "Words are easily spoken, Man out of Time."

"You don't trust us." Barton noted.

"I have little desire to." Loki returned, "My trust and faith in others has been destroyed time after time. I have no friends. And few allies. Alone I am strong."

"May those who love us, love us," The Winter Soldier started, "And those who don't love us, may God turn their hearts."

"And if he doesn't turn their hearts," Steve smiled, "May he turn their ankles, so we'll know them by their limping. Why didn't you come to me, Bucky?"

"Because I didn't know who I was at first." The Winter Soldier shrugged, "And when I did… It was amusing to have a secret of my own. Plus… It was too risky. I don't know exactly how many people I've silenced because they got too close to finding out… But it's a lot. I couldn't let you be another. Only you went poking around *anyway*. You didn't find out… But you got too close. That's why they did what they did. That's why they faked your death. Why they didn't just kill you I'm not entirely sure. But I reckon it's got something to do with their fascination with the Serum."

"You know a great deal." Coulson realized.

"I've done my research." The Winter Soldier defended himself, "I had to. The Brat insisted. He doesn't take chances. Not with other people's lives. You should know that."

"I do." Steve agreed, "I've seen the Folly. I take it you have too?"

“No.” The Soldier shook his head, “No, I’ve never been. He told me about it. Said I could go anytime. I just chose not to. Too risky… And…”

“You were scared.” Steve laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, “You were scared what they would think of you.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have anything to fear. They’ll be glad.” Steve paused for a moment, “Has anyone filled Spiderman in?”

A chorus of no’s ran around the room.

“Jarvis.” Steve addressed the ceiling, “Make the call. Phil, you speak, else he’s going to be shocked.”

“You are connected, Master Clint.” Jarvis replied.

“Spiderman,” Coulson was firm, “Is New York secure?”

“Yeah,” Spiderman’s voice was confident, “We couldn’t contain all of the Hydra Agents. A good number legged it. Figured it was better to stop the attackers than the runners.”

“Good call.” Coulson agreed.

“And DC?”

“Secured. We are currently on our way to the Folly. Meet us there.”

“Wait,” Barton spoke up, “He doesn’t know where the Folly is.”

“Actually I do.” Spiderman replied, “I know someone who knows someone there. It’ll take me a little while. Not enough buildings to swing from. See you soonish.”

“Tony?” Barton asked after the call ended.

“Don’t think so.” Steve hedged his bets.

“No.” The Winter Soldier shook his head, “His uncle had a friend.”

“How do you even *know* that?” Steve stared.

“I talk to Billy.” The Soldier shrugged, “And he talks to him.”

“You figured it out?” Coulson blinked.

“Not hard,” The Soldier declared, “Once you spot the clues. Had a devil of a time keeping the Brat from figuring it out. Same with all of you, actually. You weren’t making my life much easier. Except in the fact that you wanted him kept safe.”

“You should have come to me.” Steve stated firmly.

“Gentlemen and Ladies,” Jarvis interrupted, “We have arrived. May I suggest disembarking quickly so that Sir may receive treatment quickly? While I do not believe his health is in significant danger presently, I would like him to remain so.”

A computer program shouldn’t have been able to put that much thinly veiled malice into his last seven words. But somehow Jarvis could and did.

“Too much I in his AI.” Barton muttered softly.

“Always did.” Rhodey remarked in agreement.

Steve had gathered Tony up in his arms, the Hulk conceding this time.

Their disembarkation was quick and precise. Within moments they were inside the main building of the Folly. Though the Hulk chose to stay outside with a comment of:

“Hulk Protect.”

“Sir!” The receptionist protested, “You do not have access to these grounds. I have to ask you to leave.”

Steve looked him straight in the eye.

“My picture is in the files.” He declared, “I am allowed to be here. And my presence is covered by the confidentiality clause in your contract. I vouch for them.”

Barton spun, drawing his bow, as he heard the distinctive sound of repulsors arming behind him.

Chapter 60: Chapter 59

The three Howlies were there, weapons aimed at the group. Clearly Tony had done more than provide them with a refuge. He'd *armed* the veterans. Which made Barton very, *very* nervous.

He had no idea what their eyesight was like.

"You're supposed to be dead, Captain." James pronounced.

"I've been dead before." Steve shrugged, "It doesn't seem to stick."

"Last time we didn't have a body." Jim reminded, "Prove who you are."

"Gabe told his granddaughter that Bucky and I were in a relationship during the war." Steve stated.

"They thought *what*?!" The Winter Soldier exclaimed.

"We'll deal with you in a moment, Sarge." Gabe was firm, "Not good enough, Captain."

"When did you last fondue?" James demanded.

"You… You…" Steve spluttered, "You don't *ask* someone that!"

"That's our Steve." Jim grinned, "Still blushes like a freaking Catholic schoolgirl."

"And at the stupidest of things." James agreed.

"Now for the Sarge." Gabe turned his attention to the Winter Soldier.

"I can vouch for him." Steve declared.

"No." James shook his head, "You always did have a blind spot when it came to Bucky. You were always compromised when it came to him. Easiest way to distract you. Someone looking similar enough, with the right words. You could be fooled."

"What was the one secret we all kept about you?" Gabe asked, "Just us Howlies."

"My memory still has holes like Swiss cheese," The Winter Soldier pointed out, "But… When we were held captive by Hydra, you all kept one secret… That I wasn't just physically beaten by Colonel Lohmer. I never told anyone. But Frenchie figured it out."

“You…” Steve stared at him, “You never said.”

“You didn’t need to know.” The Winter Soldier shrugged, “Besides, I don’t actually remember it. Just a memory of Gabe confronting me about it. Frenchie next to him. And anyway… He’s dead. You killed him for me.”

Barton saw that the Winter Soldier was looking at Jim.

“Yeah,” Jim nodded as he holstered his gun, “Yeah, we did. What do you need?”

“Medical section.” Steve declared.

“Sure thing.” Gabe agreed, “But I warn you, we don’t have any high level medics. A couple of nurses more used to dealing with Dementia and Alzheimer’s than anything else. Or other old people’s diseases.”

“We’ve got a medic incoming.” Barton was firm, “We just need your space for these two.”

“Is that…” James stepped forward, “Is that *Tony*? What happened Stevie?”

“Long story.” Steve shrugged, “Look I need someplace to put him down, so the medic can work on him when he gets here.”

“I’m already here.” A black man dressed in dark yellow with red crosses and a medical kit came through the door, “Where’s my patient?”

Barton idly noticed that Billy, the white clad Storm Shadow and the black clad Snake-Eyes followed behind.

“Here.” The Winter Soldier pointed, “Ignore the kid in grey. If he’s not up and about in an hour or so I’ll sort him out.”

“That long?” Wanda’s voice shook slightly.

“Sweetheart,” The Winter Soldier grinned at her, “Most would take three. I’m assuming your brother’s body will recover faster due to his nature. I just reckon that after an hour, he might be hungry. I always woke up with an ache in my stomach. And my metabolism is only slightly heightened. At least compared to his.”

“You really went through the same thing.” Wanda breathed.

"Often enough that I came to fear them saying certain Words." He shrugged, "They'd never used Sputnik before. But I knew about the others. Trust me when I say that Freight Car makes me flinch and it's not because of the train incident. I'll fix your brother up. Then I'll get you to Chuck. He can screw your heads on right. Doc, your patient. Howlies, where's the room?"

"That way." Gabe pointed, "Second door on the left. You trust this guy, Captain? Sarge?"

"I trust the guy who said he was trustworthy." The Winter Soldier declared, "And the Brat trusts his boss. Makes speciality tech for him and his people. So I think that tells you how much he trusts them."

"A lot." Jim nodded, "Move. Fix our boy."

"I'm going to need backup." The medic declared, before grabbing his radio, "General, is Lifeline en-route?…… Good, I need him. It's the Contractor…… Yes, I'll pass that on to the ninja."

He turned to look at the soldiers.

"The General has put you on security detail." The medic stated.

"Got it, Doc." Storm Shadow saluted sloppily.

"Lifeline should be here in the next five minutes. Ace is bringing him." The medic announced, "Send him my way."

"How will we recognise him?" Barton demanded.

"Dressed in red with 'Rescue' written in white down one leg." The medic replied, "Move it, people! I want to start asap."

"What should we call you, doc?" James asked as he led them to the medical room.

"Just that," The medic shrugged, "I go by Doc. Now, get out. Leave Tony on that bed. The kid on that one. I'll sort everything out. But I can't be tripping over you."

"But…" Steve started to protest.

"No buts." Doc countered, "Out."

"The Arc Reactor…" Steve tried again.

"When I need help I'll call for it." Doc was firm, "Right now? I don't need extraneous persons causing problems. So all of you, *out*!"

In moments they were ushered out of the room. They were standing in the corridor, not quite sure what had just happened.

"How'd he do that?" Rhodey breathed, "He's just one man."

"He's the Doc." Billy put in, "He's dealt with worse than you."

"We'll secure the perimeter." Storm Shadow declared, "You'll be safe here. Little confused about what *exactly* is going on. But we'll keep you safe. Hydra won't get past us."

"You're trusting awfully quickly." The Winter Soldier challenged.

"You've got a Samurai's loyalty." Storm Shadow shrugged, "Though you've sworn it to an Artisan rather than a Daimyo."

"At least he can make me the weapons I protect him with." The Winter Soldier shrugged, "And unlike most he's earned it."

"Is it not divided?" Storm Shadow pressed.

"You tell me, ninja." The Winter Soldier countered.

"No." Storm Shadow moved towards the door, "No, it is not. You are a free man."

"And that means taking responsibility for my choices." The Winter Soldier stated firmly.

"Good." Storm Shadow finished the conversation and left the building, followed by Billy and the black-clad man.

Silence reigned for a few long moments.

"Bucky?" Steve murmured, "Explain? How? When? Why?"

"Which do you want the answer to first, Punk?" The Winter Soldier sank down into a chair, removing his mask and goggles as he did so.

"How did you team up with Tony?" Steve asked, "How'd you escape from Hydra? How'd they *get* you in the *first* place? Tony didn't tell me a lot. And to be honest, I wasn't really up for asking questions."

"They found me after I fell." Bucky was looking out the window idly, "I don't fully remember what they did to me… Just… Pain. A lot of pain. Orders. Words. The Man with

the Ring. He put the Words in. Zola. He was the last to call me by my name. After him… I was the Asset… The Winter Soldier. Hydra always called me the Asset. It was the Russians who named me the Winter Soldier. And I didn't break free. It was the Brat. He found me."

"When?"

"I don't know when exactly." Bucky shrugged, "I wasn't exactly at my best. It was sometime after New York and before AIM ran off with him. Or rather Hydra disguised as AIM. He'd hacked SHIELD. And found out about me."

"So he rescued you." Clint smiled.

"No," Bucky shook his head, "He stole me. He saw a reference to Asset. Thought I was a weapon or information of some kind. Freaked him out a little when he realized I was a person. I think for a little while he thought I was a really, *really* good robot. And I thought he was a new Handler."

"You didn't…" Steve tailed off.

"I couldn't remember my own name, Stevie. Never mind anything else. But… He showed me kindness, when I couldn't even understand what kindness was."

Bucky had lifted one hand to trace patterns on the glass, not even looking at what his finger was doing.

"That first day… He called me Briar for the first time. I didn't get it. Said it was short for Briar Rose. And he didn't think I'd take too kindly to Rosie. I didn't get the joke. So he declared we were watching a movie. Sleeping Beauty. Briar Rose is another name for Aurora. The Princess."

"Disney Princess songs are a thing between the two of you." Clint murmured.

"Have been pretty much since the start." Bucky snorted, "I meant it when I said he sang Reflection really well… Anyone seen Disney's Sleeping Beauty?"

"I have." Gabe held up a hand, "I had daughters. And granddaughters. Why?"

"It reminded me of something." Bucky replied, "Reminded me of something that I couldn't remember. I'd never seen it before. But it was familiar."

"How?" Romanov frowned.

"The art style." Steve breathed, "It's very similar across all of the older Disney animations. Well, not actually the style, but the way they were drawn. And *yes* there *is* a difference. The early stuff was hand painted. If you've got a good enough eye you can tell. And I made you watch Snow White at *least* three times. Because I loved the art so much."

“When I told the Brat that it reminded me of something, but I didn’t know what. He narrowed it down to the art. Then decided that we would watch all of the Disney animated films until I recognised it. We started at the beginning of the colour ones. And hit it first time.”

In the silence that followed, Clint noticed a red-clad figure rush past them into the medical room. Clearly the Lifeline they had been notified of.

“You’re telling me Snow *White* broke the conditioning you were under?” Coulson cocked an eyebrow.

“No.” Bucky shook his head, “It just jarred things loose. I knew there were things I didn’t know that I should know. Sleep helped. Helped a lot. So did the Brat’s method of fixing my head.”

“What did he do?” Jim asked, “Cause the kid’s had some crazy ideas in the past.”

“Cashed in a favour with Doctor Strange,” Bucky shrugged, “Said he was the best Neurosurgeon around till his accident. Can’t operate, but he’s still got all his knowledge. He looked at a scan of my brain and figured out what Hydra did to hide my memories. And how to help get them back. He prescribed a lot of sleep, exposure to potential triggers and meditation along with therapy with a psychologist to put the memories back in the order they belonged. And to help with dealing with the memories.”

“Seriously?” Romanov blinked, “That’s all it took?”

“Turns out the Serum worked against them.” Bucky replied, “It kept me alive through their experiments and procedures and freezing… But it restored my memories as well. Given enough time. That’s why they kept zapping me all the time. Before freeze. After freeze. Before mission. After mission. The only reason the Words survived is that they were put in probably by hypnosis. Not entirely sure. The Man with the Ring isn’t very clear in my head.”

“Hold on,” Sam held up a hand, “You’ve been having therapy? *Where*? With who?”

“Chuck.” Bucky shrugged.

“Chuck who?” Coulson demanded.

“Xavier.” Bucky confessed, “Used to be daily. I’m down to about once a week. The Brat calls it my annual leave.”

“What do you call it?” Steve murmured.

“Therapy.” Bucky admitted, “Everyone I know at SI knows I have therapy. They just think it’s for my arm.”

“Why’d you drop then?” Wanda asked, “If the Words don’t affect you, why’d you drop?”

“The Brat made me read the Evil Overlord List. In it, it states that faking a vulnerability can distract from an *actual* weakness. I also read others of the Handbooks of my own accord. In one of them it states that the appearance of weakness can be as useful as the appearance of strength. I faked it, so they would take their eyes off me. They never even saw me move.”

“How did Hydra get into SHIELD?” Romanov insisted. Clint knew it was important to her. It was something that she’d missed.

“It was always there.” Bucky sighed, “The initial infection was back when it was the SSR. They let in Hydra scientists.”

“It was a tactical decision.” Coulson defended, “Gaining their knowledge. They weren’t extremists.”

“No,” Bucky agreed, “But some of them were fanatics. Which is a lot more dangerous. They kept quiet. And they spread their beliefs. Converted others. Disposed of those who were too dangerous. Nothing you’d spot. A mugging here. A car crash there. An accident. A few plain old murders. But they used the deaths to strengthen their own supporters. They couldn’t control everyone. So they focused on a few key areas. STRIKE was so infected that there aren’t any SHIELD Agents there anymore. Special ops, such as Hawkeye and Black Widow, pretty much unaffected.”

“Why?” Clint frowned.

“There’s so few of you.” Bucky shrugged, “Was deemed not worth the time. Besides, they reckoned a STRIKE team could take any one of you. All they had to do was make sure that when they were ready you were all isolated. There were a few mixed in with the Suits. But virtually none in the techs. After STRIKE, Security was the worst infected. There’s a few people, carefully positioned, to deal with problems. Mostly, we think they were planning on intimidating anyone who wasn’t Hydra that they needed when they came out into the light. The Brat found the file detailing how they were going to use him quite entertaining.”

“There was a file?” Steve breathed.

“There’s a lot of files.” Bucky agreed, “We’ve been rounding them all up. It’s why we’re so high on SHIELD’s bad guy list. Hydra knew what we were up to. They wanted me back. Or dead. Iron Man they just wanted dead.”

“And what was your plan?” Loki put in, “I presume you had one, Little River.”

“It was the Brat’s,” Bucky stated, “We were going to get all the information. Then kidnap Captain America. And give him the evidence. Then he’d decide what to do.”

“You believed that our Captain would believe you?” Thor intoned.

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, “Because I know Stevie. He’d never doubt me. The Brat and I were arguing about the kidnap method though. I wanted to use Tony as bait. Thought it’d be funny.”

“Jerk!” Steve punched him lightly.

“I thought it’d be funny.” Bucky reiterated, “Just didn’t say who for. The Brat nixed it though. Shame. I thought your face and his would be a picture. Was planning on having a camera ready.”

“Jerk!” Steve punched him again, a shade harder this time.

“Did Xavier mess with your mind?” Wanda whispered, “I don’t want that again. If they did it at all.”

“Oh, they did Sweetheart.” Bucky sighed, “You can bet your last dollar on that. No, Chuck doesn’t go looking for memories. He just helps me slot the ones I’ve got into the right order. So Skinny-Stevie goes before Big-and-Buff-Stevie. And we talk. A lot. These days, we talk more than he goes poking. With his help, I’ve learned meditation so that I can do the sorting out myself. I’m not the best at it. But I can get things in order. It helps calm me too. Billy and I have fairly regular meditation sessions. He’s taught me a few moving mediations.”

“You’re close.” Sam noted.

“We were both hiding.” Bucky reminded, “I can say that freely, because he’s passed his GED now. He’ll be joining the military, if he hasn’t already. That’ll keep him safe enough.”

“How did Tony find out about Hydra?” Romanov inquired.

“He never actually said,” Bucky sighed, “Or at least the answer never made much sense to me. He said he was hacking to find out how a message got from A to C when B didn’t pass it on. I wasn’t exactly fully there at the time. And it never really bothered me to press for more details. He knew. I knew. What else did we need? Though I *did* get the feeling that he was furious about it.”

“Who?” Bruce finally managed to enter, “Sorry about the delay. The Other Guy really didn’t want to go away. One of the ninja had to talk him down. And at what point did we get ninja?”

“A while back,” Bucky replied, “Good to see you, Doctor Banner.”

“Jimmy,” Bruce nodded, “Okay, can someone fill me in? The Other Guy wasn’t feeling too informative. All he gave me was a truckload of amusement.”

It took a few minutes to catch Bruce up with the information. Which he took surprisingly well, Clint thought.

“And you’re saying that the Other Guy knew the whole time?” Bruce breathed.

“It seems,” Loki smirked, “That the mindless beast is not so mindless after all.”

“Looking back,” Clint sighed, “I’m surprised we didn’t get his clues earlier.”

“Clues?” Thor frowned, “The Hulk was trying to inform us earlier of our Heart-Child’s identity?”

“I don’t think he was trying to tell us.” Clint shrugged, “I think he was just finding it funny. That he knew a secret we didn’t.”

“Wizard of Oz.” Steve face-palmed, “I should have gotten that reference.”

“What reference?” Coulson cocked his head.

“Tin-Man Shiny-Heart.” Steve explained, “Run it together and it’s obvious.”

“What was the Tin Man after?” Coulson breathed, “A heart. Dear *God* that was obvious. The best minds in SHIELD have been trying to figure out Iron Man’s identity and we didn’t realize he was living amongst us with the Hulk telling us every time.”

“When did he ask you to fight?” Romanov asked.

“He never did.” Bucky replied, “Not once. What he *did* do was point at a door. He told me that that door led outside. A direct route. He told me that if I walked out through that door, he wouldn’t look for me. He wouldn’t chase me. And that door would be open to me always. I could walk out through it right then, the next day, a week’s time, a year’s time or ten years from then. It would always be an option for me. However, the door would open both ways. I could walk through it right then, and it would still be open for me to go back through when I wanted to. I could leave and I could return when I wanted. I tested him. Left for a week. He never looked for me. And when I returned, he greeted me, never once asking me where I had been.

“I didn’t even know who he was back then. Not as Iron Man. Not as Stark. He was just Tony to me. After I returned, he told me about Iron Man. Because I asked how he found me. I knew he wasn’t Hydra. He was… Too kind. Hydra would never have recruited someone like him. *Used*, yes. Recruited? Never.”

“Kind?” Wanda scoffed, “The Merchant of Death? You were useful. That’s all.”

“Sweetheart,” Bucky drawled, “Shut your mouth. You don’t know anything. That man you think you know? The one who built all those weapons? I don’t know him. I never met him. I only ever met the guy he became. And that man? He’s kind and generous and has a massive heart. But nearly everyone he’s ever shown it too has tried to destroy it. So he hides it away.”

“Seems like you’ve got our boy down pretty much pat.” Gabe put in, “He’s always been like that. He learned to hide his heart very early on. To wear a mask.”

“We are not the masks we wear, but if we don them do we not become them?” Rhodey finished.

“Andromeda.” Loki smiled, “Quite an interesting series.”

“How many shows have you been binge watching?” Clint stared, “I mean, what are you? A sofa bear?”

“I had a collection of books I had read multiple times before and effectively a television,” Loki shrugged unrepentant, “I had to find *some* method of keeping my brain occupied. Surprisingly for all that the television is referred to as the idiot box, it was quite diverting. You have many interesting forms of entertainment.”

“What’d I miss?” Spiderman asked as he climbed in through the window, “Whoa! Captain! You were… I thought you… They said… Okay, seriously! Can someone tell me what the blazes is going on?… Oh, jeeze! Everybody lives? Seriously? *That’s* how you decided to tell us, Hawkeye? I think we need to get you a session with a councillor. Anyone got a clue how we’re going to tell Tony? Opps, we made a mistake? I don’t think that’s going to go down well.”

“That will not be a problem, Warrior of the Spiders.” Thor intoned, “Come, listen. You have missed much.”

Chapter 61: Chapter 60

Clint was dividing his attention between Loki and Wanda. He was convinced that one of them was going to try something; though what that was and which one of them, he wasn't entirely sure. He tuned out the explanation, he knew everything he needed to know.

"Wait…" Spiderman turned to blink at Bucky, "Winter is Coming? Seriously? How obvious were you trying to be?"

"Okay," Clint cut in, "I'm clearly missing something here. What is it about that phrase? It sounds pretty normal to me."

"Game of Thrones," Spiderman sighed, "Motto of the House of Stark. My aunt's a big fan."

"When you play the Game of Thrones," Bucky breathed, "You win or you die. It seemed… Similar to our situation. The Brat doesn't like the series though. He's a book fan."

"Oh," Steve cut in, "You discovered that too? The way he has the scientific journal on the next screen…"

"So he can switch to it and pretend to be insulting someone's work?" Bucky took back over, "Not exactly subtle, is he?"

"Nope." Steve grinned, "So you've been watching Disney movies and Game of Thrones all this time?"

"As well as working Security." Bucky nodded, "Someone had to watch your six."

"I never saw you." Steve protested.

"Didn't want you to." Bucky shrugged, "Worked the cameras mostly. And chauffeured. The Brat always preferred to drive when it was just the two of you. I did it pretty much all the rest of the time. Wore a hat and kept my head down, if you were about. You never noticed, but then again, you weren't looking."

"What happens now?" Wanda interrupted, "I mean… What happens now?"

"The Brat heals." Bucky was firm, "You get checked out by Xavier for traps in your head. You and your brother. We take down Hydra. Life carries on."

"You join the Avengers." Steve cut in, "If you want to. Open to you *and* your brother. We're going to need allies and I think you'd be good ones. Iron Man becomes a hero or retires. Personally I'm betting on the Hero. He's too much a good man."

“No,” Loki spoke up, “He has too many rules to be a good man. But that doesn’t stop him from being a great one.”

“Will you stop that?” Spiderman asked, “I can’t take it if you mix Sherlock and Doctor Who at the same time. Those two sets of quotes don’t belong together, okay?”

“I’ll tell you a quote that does fit,” Bucky smiled slightly, “A quote that I remembered today and was true… The Brat told me it once, and he was right…”

“What did he tell you?” Gabe asked softly.

“If you have to look along the shaft of an arrow from the wrong end,” Bucky recited, “If a man has you at his mercy, then hope like hell that man is an evil man.”

Clint stared at that. Tony wouldn’t say something like that. Tony would never want to be held captive by an evil person. He knew what sort of damage they could and *would* do.

“Because the evil like power,” Bucky continued, “Power over people, and they want to see you in fear. They want you to know you are going to die. So they'll talk. They'll gloat.

They'll watch you squirm. They'll put off the murder like another man will put off a good cigar.”

“So hope like hell your captor is an evil man.” Jim took over, “A good man will kill you with hardly a word.”

“That was one of Dum-Dum’s.” James smiled, “He always liked that series. He also swore by another quote.”

“You can’t go around building a better world for people.” Gabe provided it, “Only people can build a better world for people. Otherwise it’s just a cage.”

“He swore by that one after the Red Room incident.” Jim stated, “Seems to fit Hydra, actually.”

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, “Yeah, it does.”

“Do you feel guilty?” Wanda’s voice was small, “For all the lives you took?”

“Every day, sweetheart,” Bucky fired back calmly, “Every day. What do you *actually* want to ask? Just ask it. If I don’t want to answer I won’t.”

“You broke.” She declared, “They broke you. How do you deal with that?”

“Little by little,” Bucky shrugged, “Day by day. And I remember what the Brat told me. They never broke him. I felt shame at first about that. Shame that I, a *soldier*, broke,

when he a civilian didn't. But then he pointed something out…"

Bucky tailed off, looking out the window again.

"What?" Natasha leaned forward.

"They weren't trying to break him." Bucky smiled wanly, "They weren't trying to break him, because they didn't think they needed to. Why break him? He was just a civilian. He was weak. He could be controlled. They just needed him compliant. Breaking would take too long and be too much bother. I was different. I *had* to be broken to be useable. They were scared of me. They had all the power. All the weapons. All the science. And they were scared of *me*. The only way they could even *think* about using me was to break me. I would be too dangerous otherwise. I didn't *break* because I was *weak*. I was *broken* because I was *strong*."

There was a long silence after that.

In some strange way it made sense. Clint could easily think of a number of occasions where the enemy had deliberately targeted a person who wouldn't easily break; simply to produce fear in other captives, but also out of fear *of* that person.

"You showed us…" Wanda tailed off for a moment, before regaining her courage, "When you confronted us… In Sokovia… You had footage of what they did to you… Of what they made you do… Why not tell us about the Words then?"

"I wasn't thinking straight," Bucky was blunt, "The Staff… Loki's Staff… Or maybe the Mind Stone he spoke of… It was messing with my head."

"Is that why you wrote nonsense on the walls?" Wanda frowned.

"It wasn't nonsense." Bucky's voice was rock solid, "It was important."

"It wasn't words." Natasha was gentle, "It was nonsense."

"It was phonetic." Bucky replied with iron in his words.

"Nah King, Nah Quin, Nah Maister?" Steve sounded it out slowly, "I don't follow. It's not even Gaelic."

"Nah King, nah Quin, nah Maister," Clint breathed, "Wee free men. Nah King, nah Quin, nah Maister, we'll not be fooled again. Bad Glaswegian accent. Tony said you had an

affection for them."

"I get where they're coming from." Bucky grinned, "Didn't think anyone would get it. I wasn't thinking straight at the time. I just felt it was important to say."

Suddenly a blur emerged from the medical area, resolving into Pietro in a moment. He was jabbering away at his sister so fast that even *if* he was speaking English, Clint doubted that he'd be able to understand him.

Wanda replied at a slower pace, but still incomprehensible to Clint. He'd never bothered learning Sokovian, for all its similarity to Russian.

"Do you have any news?" Steve cut across the siblings.

"Of Stark?" Pietro raised an eyebrow, "No. They threw me out. Said I was fine. I tried to protest. But the white one… He started mentioning vaccinations…"

"Pietro is terrified of needles." Wanda put in, "Has been since he was a child. Our mother once took us to a doctor and I was first. They caught me in the waiting room when I ran. Pietro got half-way home before they caught him."

"How close was your home?" Sam asked gently.

"Six blocks," Pietro shrugged, "I always was fast… Just not as I am now. But why is Stark here? He should be locked up in his tower. Hiding in fear."

"He is Iron Man." Wanda replied softly.

"No!" Pietro exclaimed, "That cannot be! Stark is… He is…"

"Not what we thought." Wanda chided, "Remember I told you that, when he let me see a little into his mind. Perhaps he was once. But he has changed."

"Only the grave cures the hunchback." Pietro snapped in return, "However much you feed the wolf, he still looks at the woods."

"And a lie runs around the world before the truth has got it's boots on." Bucky countered, "What you know of the Brat is what you have been told. Apart from that one time in Central Park, you've never actually spoken with him. So what right do you have to judge a man you don't know? Look, we've been through all of this with your sister. Talk to her. Learn things."

For a while they sat in silence, apart from the hushed whisperings between the twins.

"You found all of this information hidden in SHIELD?" Coulson looked up from a tablet.

"No," Bucky shook his head, "It wasn't easily accessible, else the Brat could have done it all from his Workshop. There was some on the network. But some wasn't hooked up. Was on isolated computers or paper files."

"We never saw you carrying paper." Sam frowned.

"You never saw our paper runs," Bucky smirked, "For every blatant raid we did… There was at *least* one under the radar one, probably two. Besides, the best paper records were kept in the oldest bases. The ones no-one really uses anymore. Apart from the Camp."

"Lehigh?" Steve leaned forward, "There were computer parts there."

"There was more than a computer." Bucky declared, "Zola was there."

"Zola is dead." Natasha was firm.

"He is now." Bucky sounded proud.

"He died years ago." Coulson reminded.

"His body died." Bucky retorted, "But he found a way for his mind to live on. In a computer. Up until the Camp was destroyed Pierce still used him as an advisor. We had hell getting the data outta him. Couldn't hack him. He was never online long enough. In the end, the Brat unleashed Jarvis. We provided the distraction. Zola authorised a missile to take us out, while he fled to the internet. Big mistake. Jarvis shredded his code."

"Why were you so obvious?" Coulson frowned, "If you could steal paper without us noticing, then surely you could have flown underneath the radar for the whole thing?"

"No," Bucky shook his head, "You didn't notice the other raids, but there was a chance Hydra would have. So we had to give them a target. Otherwise they'd go looking for one. At least this way we knew they'd target us and leave everyone else alone."

"You painted a target on your chests." Steve's voice was tense.

"And you painted one on yours, years ago." Bucky shrugged, "Only yours was a white star. You've not exactly got stable ground to talk from here, Punk. Besides, we knew what we were doing. I always had the option to walk away. And he could have done the same. The problem was the more we found out… The worse it was."

Most people wouldn't have noticed it, but Clint spotted the tension in the shoulders and the shifting of the arms that said that Bucky was embarrassed and slightly uncomfortable about the direction the questioning had taken.

Unfortunately for Bucky, Clint couldn't bring himself to care really. It was easier than interrogating Tony would be. Despite Bucky's claims of amusement at the deception, he clearly felt some level of guilt and so was revealing more than he probably would under different circumstances. Throw in the guilt for not taking down Stern when he had the chance, which Clint *knew* Bucky was suffering from, and Bucky was being quite talkative.

Tony would be like pulling hen's teeth.

"I hope you realize there will have to be a Press Conference about all of this." Coulson stated.

"Not today?" Steve almost… No, he *was* begging.

"Soon." Coulson was firm, "But… Not necessarily today."

The door opened and Doc walked out.

"Doc?" Gabe spoke first. It seemed he actually managed to get his voice to work before the others.

"He'll live." Doc got the statement out the way quickly.

Almost as if he was used to delivering bad information in a set format.

"He's going to need a fair amount of rest." Doc continued, "Lifeline's just finishing the bandages. He's not been eating properly. And he's dehydrated. Quite honestly, I'm surprised he got to the end of the fight without collapsing on you."

"What have you been doing?" Clint stared at the rest of the Avengers, "I'm out the Tower for a *week*! And *this* happens?"

“This is more than a week.” Doc interrupted, before anyone else could start to defend themselves, “This is months of not enough sleep, not enough food, not enough water. He’s been getting enough to carry on. But he’s destroyed his reserves.”

“No.” Bucky protested, shaking his head, “Look… I made *sure* he was eating. Got Jarvis to tattle on him and everything. Figured out the exact amount of calories he needed to eat in a day and made sure he got it. Three thousand, one hundred and thirty. He was eating enough. I’ll swear that.”

“Unless,” Doc raised an eyebrow, “He had a persistent low grade fever. A low running infection. Had it for quite a while I think. I recommended that he continued with a low dose, broad spectrum antibiotic, which I believe he has not done.”

“Recommended?” Rhodey frowned slightly, “You’re the doctor from before… The one from after Afghanistan. The one who snuck in to the house in Malibu.”

“Got snuck in.” Doc shrugged, “General Hawk has a vested interest in keeping Mister Stark alive. If that means lending out his medics… Then that’s what he’ll do. His lungs are compromised. Have been ever since. Low dose, broad spectrum antibiotic should keep on top of the opportunistic infections he’s prone to. Reckon he started them not long after he realized he *was* infected, which is why it stayed as a low level infection with a low grade fever, however that is a *preventative* dose, so he actually needed a full course. All he’s done is delay the infection’s spread, it’s still there.”

“I never noticed him running a temperature.” Steve put in, “And I’d think I’d notice, Doc. I do sleep with the guy.”

“He generally runs on the cold side anyway,” Doc pointed out, “I’ve done a medical or two on him before; it doesn’t take much either, for every degree farenheight you’re looking at a seven percent increase in Basal Metabolic Rate, which completely throws your calculations out. This could have been going for weeks, even months if he was an idiot genius, which he generally is. Unofficially I’m cataloguing the whole Iron Man thing in that category; officially I was never here. None of us were. I’ve put him on a high strength, broad spectrum antibiotic to try and tackle the infection; recommend that someone he trusts removes the Reactor and cleans the housing to remove any debris or infected matter in there; Lifeline’s writing out directions on how to make up a suitable cleanser. I don’t touch that thing, I’m not allowed. We’ve taken a sample of blood, which we’ll run through the standard resistance tests and update you on what specific antibiotic would be best; personally I recommend that he continue on antibiotics for at least two weeks, steroids during that time as well to improve his breathing; he’s currently on oxygen to try and counteract any further compromisation of his lungs that he’s managed to rack up. Always *does* have to be awkward, doesn’t he? Then again, so does *everyone* I have to treat.”

“You’re one of Abernathy’s boys, aren’t you?” Gabe finally cut across the stream of information, “I remember hearing about you, Lawrence spoke about you lot. He was very fond of you.”

“Larry’s Lads!” Jim put in, “I remember. Never thought I’d see one though. Well… At least we can be sure that Tony’s in good hands.”

“Huh?” Steve blinked at them.

“Being your Howlies,” James smiled, “Gave us a *lot* of weight in the military world. None of us ever became Generals or anything, but when we talked Generals listened. They even paid attention to Jim and Gabe, despite the roaring prejudice. You recruited us. You chose us. *Personally*. A lot of people put value on that, even though they probably shouldn’t have.”

“Certainly didn’t hurt that Philips spoke for us too.” Jim added, “And Peggy. Even Howard. We got to meet a lot of up and coming people. Larry came to us for advice as to how to set up the team. Who to pick.”

“You’re being awfully free with information here.” Sam noted to Doc.

“You’re on the list.” Doc shrugged, “The list of people I am authorised to give information to… Well, apart from Loki and the duo over there; but the pair aren’t listening and Loki will most likely get it out of Thor later anyway, whether blondie realizes it or not.”

“Most likely not.” Loki smirked, “I appreciate your candour, doctor.”

“Doctor Banner,” Doc turned to the man, “Although I am told you have no formal training in medical matters, I am lead to believe that you can understand a medical chart. Please ensure the recommendations on them are followed as closely as possible. Contact details are noted on the first page, should there be any problems. Generally, ladies and gentlemen, I advise rest, the antibiotics, pain-killers and a psychiatrist. If he can’t find one that can deal with his particular brand of crazy, tell him to call, we have one that treats ninjas… Or tries to at least, they’re not particularly fond of hanging around long enough *for* him to treat them; however, he is a good listener.”

“Doc,” Lifeline emerged from the room, “I’ve done all we can. We’d best move before someone has to notice that we’re AWOL… Again. If someone could inform him that I, for one, would appreciate it, if he could keep that Suit of his out of the hands of basically *everyone*, they would have my thanks. In the meantime, he’s going to need a lot of rest; if I see him out in that Suit in the next *month* tell him I’m coming to give him his booster injections.”

“You ain’t playing nice anymore, Lifeline.” Billy remarked appearing, seemingly, out of nowhere, “Sensei has transport sorted. I’ll catch you later Jimmy.”

“You know how to contact me.” Bucky agreed, “And I’m sure these lugnuts will be pleased to see you anytime.”

“One of Abernathy’s boys?” Gabe grinned, “I’m sure we’ll find something to talk about… He still wear that bomber jacket of his?”

“Every day, sir.” Billy responded immediately, even as he walked backwards behind the medics out of the building.

By the time Clint had turned back to look at the door to the medical section, Steve was already through it.

Not that Clint had seriously expected anything else.

Chapter 62: Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was dark when Tony finally stirred from his injury-induced slumber. Clint, perched on top of a cupboard, kept quiet, watching over the scene.

"Briar," Tony murmured, looking at the man, "I had the weirdest dream. What happened? I was… I was…"

"What was the dream about?" Bucky asked, his feet up on the bed as he leaned back in his chair.

"Steve was alive." Tony replied, "I know it's stupid, he's dead… But… It… It felt *real*, you know?"

"Check the other side of the bed, Brat." Bucky snorted, "Then talk to me."

Tony turned and stared. Steve was holding his hand, had been since he'd been allowed in, but had fallen asleep, draped across the bed. Somehow, and Clint wasn't entirely sure *how*, he'd managed to avoid putting too much weight on Tony, so the Genius hadn't fully been aware of his presence until Bucky had pointed it out.

Although part of that could have been due to the pain-killers Tony was still doped up on.

"But…" Tony stared, "But… It was true? It really…?"

"Yes, Brat." Bucky pulled Tony into a rough hug, "Everybody Lives and the Doctor Dances. You're safe. Stevie's safe. I'm safe. I've got you."

"Jarvis," Tony was firm, but quiet, "You up?"

"Always for you, Sir." Jarvis declared.

Okay, Tony had Jarvis in more places than Clint realized… And probably more than he was comfortable with to be brutally honest, who knew *what* the AI had seen over the years.

“What’s the sitch with Hydra?” Tony asked, “Give me all the deets.”

“Belay that Jarvis.” Bucky cut in, before the reply was given, “Brat, you’re injured. Down for the moment. Rest. Recuperate. You need this.”

“I *need* Hydra gone. You should get that.”

“I do. But I also know that if you keep going like this… You’ll kill yourself. I can’t lose you. *Steve* can’t lose you. Don’t do this to us.”

“I can stop them.” Tony fired back, “I escaped the Ten Rings. I took down Stane. I can do this. I’ve been on my own a long time. I don’t need anyone else to protect me.”

“You may not *need* it.” Bucky countered, “But you sure as hell can’t tell me that you don’t *want* it. I get it. I really do. You’ve been on your own for so long… Nearly all your life, right? Everyone left eventually. So you got used to not needing anyone… Because you couldn’t rely on anyone. But you can now. You’ve got me. You’ve got Steve.”

“Do I?” Tony muttered, “You all lied to me.”

And didn’t *that* hit Clint right in the gut?

“Find out our reasons before you judge,” Bucky instructed, “Mine are pretty simple, when I remembered that I knew Captain America, I kept it a secret from you at first, because it was something that was *mine*. Something *no-one* could take away from me. When I realized it was your Steve… I wanted to surprise you. It was a joke. I never meant it to get this far. I never meant for… For all of *this* to happen. I just… I wanted to see your faces. I was going to get *pictures*! Stevie always called me a Jerk. And I am. A guy who does stupid things. My ma used to call me her idiot. It was just… Just a joke. A practical joke that went very, *very* wrong. And I’m sorry.”

“Then get me off these pain-killers.” Tony challenged, “I can deal with the pain.”

“I know you can.” Bucky nodded, “But you don’t have to. And you’re not going to. They stay. Don’t even try to remove them yourself. I’ll stop you if I have to.”

“According to you, you’re my *friend*!” Tony fired back.

“And I am.” Bucky agreed, “Which means I will tell you when you are being an idiot. And you’re being one right now. You don’t have to save the world.”

“Hydra needs to be stopped.”

“But not necessarily by you, right now.”

“They took Steve. What do you *expect* me to do?”

“When you can’t run anymore, you crawl.” Bucky declared.

“And when you can’t do that,” Tony murmured, “You find someone to carry you.”

“Looks to me,” Bucky grinned, “Like you got a lot of people here willing to carry you. You might want to consider letting them.”

Bucky waved a hand around the room, it was cluttered with people. The Howlies had claimed a sofa between the three of them, which Thor had relocated into the room for them. Pietro and Wanda were curled up on the same bed; how they both fitted on the thing was slightly beyond Clint. Natasha was apparently dozing on another bed, not quite asleep, ready to react to the slightest threat; however, Clint knew she was unashamedly eavesdropping. Phil was doing the same in the recliner at the base of Clint’s cupboard. Sam was using the old adage of soldiers everywhere and getting sleep while he could; with no other beds available, he’d made up a comfy spot on the floor with blankets swiped *from* Clint’s cupboard. Loki had *conjured* a bed from somewhere and would have been the most comfortable person in the room, if Thor hadn’t declared that they were sharing just like when they had been children. Clint had *felt* the drop in the room’s temperature with the glare that Loki had levelled at his adopted brother, but Thor had been oblivious. Loki had clearly decided it wasn’t worth the fight and given in; although if Clint was reading the Asgardian/Jotun correctly Thor would be regretting it in the morning. Bruce was curled up at the foot of Natasha’s bed, taking up less space than Clint thought was even *possible*. Rhodey was probably going to end up with an uncomfortable crick in his back, given that he was half propped up on the foot of Tony’s bed and half curled up on the floor, with only a blanket thrown over him for warmth; although the room was a comfortable temperature by Clint’s standards. Peter, still in his Spiderman costume, had made himself a hammock up in a corner and was securely set in for the night; though Clint wondered when the webbing would give way.

“I’ll vouch for that.” Clint piped up, “Tony, take a day, okay? You’ve earned it. Multiple times over. Take a day. And man? I’m sorry. It started off as habit… It became orders… And we never got permission. Probably should have just defied them looking back, but I never thought… I never realized… Fucking Pierce! He probably was going to present you with the information later and turn you against us. Make you Hydra that way. We just wanted you safe. We were trying to protect you. Road to hell and all that. Maybe if we’d disobeyed and told you things would have gone a lot smoother… But we care for you. Hell, we love you. You’re my bratty younger brother.”

“I’m the older one.” Tony protested.

“*I’m* the big brother.” Bucky was firm, “And right now, it doesn’t matter if I’m using the little brothers or the bigger brothers to look after you. All that matters is that you’re hurt. And I’m going to make sure you take the time to heal. Get some rest, Brat.”

“I’ve got stuff to do.” Tony moved as if to get up.

“Like Hell you do!” Bucky snapped.

Reaching to where the PCA was, Bucky quickly pressed the button; the click as the dose was released was audible in the silence of the room.

“Hey!” Tony protested, “I’m okay! Don’t do that!”

However, his words were already slurring and his eyelids becoming heavy as the medication raced through his system.

“Tones,” Clint called out softly, “How’d you know about Hydra?”

“Hacked SHIELD.” Tony responded sleepily, “Read it.”

“But you were *looking*,” Clint stressed, “How’d you know to look?”

“The pilots took off.” Tony was trying to explain, “How’d they know?”

“Know what?” Bucky carried on the questioning.

“It was a stupid-ass decision.” Tony breathed, “Elected to ignore… So how’d the pilots know to go? Can’t ask them… How’d they know to go?”

Clint was lip-reading more than he was hearing as Tony finally succumbed to the medication.

“Okay,” Clint addressed the room, “Did that make sense to anyone? Do you need more intel?”

“The missile,” Phil put in, “New York. It was a WSC decision. Fury declared it was a wrong decision. He never passed the launch information onto the pilots… But two took off anyway.”

“Why weren’t they questioned?” Bucky demanded.

“They both died.” Phil shrugged, “With all the clear up after the battle it got lost in the chaos I guess. Fury wasn’t exactly on top of his game right then.”

“You’re not his one good eye for nothing.” Clint sighed, “Hill can’t even measure up… She Hydra?”

“No.” Bucky shook his head, “She’s clear.”

“It is interesting to note,” Natasha joined in the conversation, “That Fury’s exact words were ‘I recognise the council has made a decision, but given that it’s a stupid-ass decision, I've elected to ignore it.’ Tony must have viewed the footage.”

“Tony went digging based on a single incident?” Phil frowned, “Then again, he was burned once by someone he trusted. Once bitten, twice shy.”

“Nah,” Bucky grinned, “He just doesn’t like unanswered questions. If you knew about the number of people who *had* hurt him in the past… You’d wonder why he trusts at all. What I want to know, Agent… Why’d he take his Armour off for Congress?”

“Students were there.” Phil sighed, “Winners of a Science Fair thing. He’d known about it, but thought they were at the Air and Space Museum… Only someone changed the schedule. Last minute thing. He knew he could get them out as Stark. But not as Iron Man. We weren’t sure where they were in the building, with all the chaos; so we split up. He found them and got them out through the tunnels… Or at least he directed them to the tunnels. From what I was hearing on the comms, he played distraction to buy them time to get out. Smart move.”

“Stupid move.” Clint muttered, “He’s worth more than they were.”

“Not to the Brat.” Bucky muttered, “He’d burn himself alive to save someone.”

“True.” Phil agreed, “But he’s just as important to us. Why can’t he see that?”

“Howard damaged him in more ways than one.” Clint declared firmly.

123456789

For the official record, Hawkeye *hated* Press Conferences. However, he knew it was a necessary evil, particularly given what had happened; people needed reassurance about what had happened. They were scared, so they needed reassurance. Nothing like finding out about a secret military organisation intent on enslaving the world to cause people to want answers.

The Avengers stood facing the Press in full uniform; Hawkeye discretely wriggled his nose to better settle his shades.

The Winter Soldier had settled, easily, into position just to the left and back a bit from Captain America; given how comfortable both of them seemed with it, Hawkeye was betting that it had been Bucky's usual position during marches in the War. The Avengers had adapted to the addition and were arrayed behind; the Black Widow was on the Captain's right, with the Falcon on *her* right; Thor was level with the Captain, just to Bucky's left; Banner, as normal was hanging right at the back, almost invisible behind the Falcon; War Machine was just off to Thor's side and back a bit. Hawkeye was tucked into Thor and War Machine's shadows, not quite comfortable with being on display, for all the fact that he was masked up.

To be fair, the Black Widow wasn't too happy about it either; she just hid it better.

Spiderman had managed to get out of the whole thing, because he had school; also, as far as the Press was aware, Spiderman wasn't a member of the Avengers, simply an affiliate.

Loki and the Twins were in the Tower; Hawkeye wasn't entirely sure he was comfortable with them being in *his* space, but better that than with the Commandos. Jarvis was probably a little more dangerous than a group of men, who looked like they would be blown over in a strong wind.

The initial statement was quite bland given the situation; just a general overview of what had gone on. About how Hydra had managed to remain hidden for so long and why Iron Man and the Winter Soldier had chosen *that* particular method of revealing the truth. Coulson had worked particularly hard on the statement, making sure not to sensationalise anything. Fortunately, the security cameras had gone down not long after the Winter Soldier's info dump, so identities were still secure. The reporters already had enough to work with to make headlines; there was no need to make anything worse by giving them too much to play with. Best to keep it simple and straightforward.

The questions would be bad enough.

"Captain," The first reporter rose to speak, "We can clearly see that you have adopted the Winter Soldier into the Avengers; however, there is no sign of Iron Man. There hasn't been since the battle on Capitol Hill. What had become of him?"

"Iron Man was injured in the battle." The Captain replied, "Currently he is recuperating from his injuries. When he has recovered, he will be given the option of joining the Avengers."

“Winter Soldier,” Another rose, “How do you feel about fighting alongside those you fought *against* for so long?”

“It was a game,” The Winter Soldier shrugged, “At least to me and Iron Man. We always knew we’d end up teaming up with them. To be honest the only thing that really got me, was the fact we had to leave them ignorant for so long. I found it *funny*, and was completely looking forward to revealing it to them. Especially this Punk. But I didn’t like leaving them amongst enemies unaware. Iron Man didn’t like it either; however, he’s more pragmatic. We were leaving them unaware, but that in itself provided a level of protection. Every fight we had, increased their protection, because they became more focused on us.”

“However it backfired,” The Captain took over, “I became more interested in the why than the who. Iron Man gave me enough for me to be focused on them and I wanted to understand why they did what they did.”

“So can we expect to see Iron Man in the Avenger roster in the future?”

“That depends upon Iron Man,” The Captain stated, “The initial reason Iron Man was created was to bring to light certain injustices. Those have since been resolved. If Iron Man decides to retire that is a decision, we will have to accept.”

Not likely, Hawkeye thought. Though the Captain was probably planning on arguing it out with Tony for quite some time before he gave in to the inevitable and let Iron Man do as he wished.

Hawkeye was quite looking forward to the entertainment. Tony had been too injured for Steve to feel comfortable in starting a confrontation about anything; it didn’t mean the situation was resolved or that the argument about everything wasn’t going to happen, simply that it had been shelved for now. Hawkeye was planning on bringing *popcorn* to that event.

“How do you know that you can trust them?”

“Both the Winter Soldier and the Man of Iron have lifted Mjolnir.” Thor intoned, “While neither of them were deemed worthy to wield the Lightning; they were deemed to be sufficiently true of heart to wield Mjolnir as a weapon. It is no mean feat. Many have failed, even some of the Avengers. They have proven their worth.”

“That may work in Asgard, but this is Earth. We need more than just some magic to tell us that we can trust people. Particularly given the crimes that Iron Man has commited.”

“Is not my word enough?” Thor frowned.

“For those of us who know you, Point Break.” The voice came out of the blue, “Of course it is. However, the ravenous pack of journalists require a little more. Especially given

that that one works for the Bugle."

Iron Man touched down between the Avengers and the reporters. For once forgoing his landing pose, though that could have been because the landing was smooth and controlled.

There was a long moment of pure silence, before the journalists rallied and the photography hit extreme levels.

"You're still injured," The Captain walked forward to be level with Iron Man, "We agreed you would stay in bed."

"No," Iron Man replied, "You declared. I disagreed, but chose not to tell you. This is me telling you."

"You're angry at me."

"Damn right I am."

"Would it help if I told you it was orders?"

"Not particularly."

"You kept secrets too."

"Mine could have gotten you killed. I was *protecting* you!"

The Captain had moved quite clearly into Iron Man's personal space. So close in fact that the two of them were only just not touching.

Hawkeye noticed idly that all the reporters had fallen quiet; clearly they realized that something significant was happening. Even if they didn't know what.

"I get that you're angry. Rightfully so. And I'm sorry, it just… It just seemed easier at the time. It was a mistake. I shouldn't have done it."

"Yeah, you shouldn't."

"But you could have told me. I can look after myself. You know that."

“I was going to. Before I found out about Hydra. I was just waiting for a year and a day. That was my deadline. I was going to prove to you that I could go without for a year and a day before I told you. So that you knew it was in my past. That I had left it behind. I wasn’t going to count New York, because… Well, I was a bone-fida good guy then. It didn’t matter in the scheme of things. I had saved lives. I thought you’d be proud of that.”

“I was… I am… You really were going to tell me?”

“Yes. It was all in the plan. I had to work really hard to get everything done before…. You know.”

“And we were worried we’d have to duck out because of you.” The Captain snorted.

“I’d never do that… It was driving me *nuts* trying to schedule everything. I was spread thin.”

“Looking back, you looked it.”

“I thought I was doing well at covering it up.”

“I just thought it was stress. I was stressed too. Though I’ve heard it’s normal.”

“I’m still mad at you.”

“I know.” The Captain smiled softly, “You’ve a right to be. I’m angry too.”

Hawkeye managed to tear his eyes away from the scene.

“Are they *seriously* having a domestic in front of *reporters*?” He hissed at the other Avengers, “I mean I know I wanted to watch this but…”

“This is a little public.” War Machine agreed, “However I’m not going to stop them.”

“I’m not getting involved.” The Winter Soldier added, “Stevie’s still mad at me and I don’t think the Brat’s much happier either.”

“Well,” Hawkeye muttered, “We all knew this would happen. Though I was planning on spying on it… With popcorn.”

“Will this suffice, Little Hawk?” Loki’s voice came from nowhere, then he appeared much like the Cheshire Cat; a bowl of popcorn held in his hands.

“Brother!” Thor rejoiced, “You have come to join us?”

“To watch,” Loki returned, “I forsee this being most entertaining… And I didn’t even have a hand in creating it. Oh what fools these mortals be.”

“I’m with Loki on this,” Sam remarked, “This is going to be fun.”

“Anyone taking bets on what the Press make of it?” Natasha asked, “Five will get you ten that they assume the Iron Man is a woman.”

Hawkeye turned his attention away from the betting and back to the fight.

“You made Bucky keep your secret.” Steve challenged; and it was Steve for all he was still dressed and cowled as Captain America.

“Made him?” Tony countered, “Briar keeps his own council for his own reasons. He just wanted to *laugh* at us. I never made him keep secrets. Never asked him to either.”

“I was just trying to keep you safe.”

“So you told everyone else in our life, but not me?”

“Not everyone… And I didn’t tell all of them. Most of them found out.”

“Oh, sorry. *Nearly* everyone else knew. But you kept them from telling me.”

“I just wanted you safe. You did the same!”

“*I* was justified. And besides, I only told one other *human*.”

“I’m sorry. Okay? I really am sorry. But the longer it went on… The easier it was to just… Leave the lie in place.”

“And that makes it okay?”

“What do you want me to do? Apologise? I’m sorry. I truly am. All I have is excuses as to why I didn’t tell you. I don’t have reasons. I’m sorry, Shellhead.”

“I know you are, Winghead. It still hurts though. That you didn’t trust me.”

“One life, one home.” Steve stepped even closer, virtually stepping on Tony’s feet, “I can’t do this without you. That was my mistake; I won’t make it again.”

“What do you mean?” The tilt of Tony’s head meant that he was confused.

“I need you. I’ve always needed you. I just didn’t know it. If you want to continue in the Armour… Stand with me.”

“Your Number Two?”

“No. Co-Leader. We’ve always done well together because as much as we are the same, we are different. Opposites attract and all that. We’re stronger together than we are

apart. Together there is no rain. Please?"

"As you wish."

"Please?" Steve tried again; though why Hawkeye didn't quite know, it was clear that Tony had acquiesced to Steve's plan.

"Captain America," One the Journalists managed to recover enough to interrupt, "You know Iron Man's true identity? Can we presume from your interaction that Iron Man is in fact the Iron *Woman*?"

"You know," Tony turned to face them, "I really don't like that name… Iron Man… It's a Gold Titanium Alloy… Although I will give you that Iron Man is pithier than Gold Titanium. For the record though, there's more iron in War Machine that there is in Iron Man. I didn't use ferrous materials."

"But you *are* a woman." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Called it." Natasha grinned; her voice barely audible, and slightly garbled around the popcorn in her mouth. Clearly she'd decided that Loki's popcorn was safe, so Clint felt safe enough to claim his own portion.

"Did I ever say that?" Tony retorted; even without seeing it, Clint knew there was a smug smirk on Tony's face.

"The two of you know each other outside of your masks, and clearly there's a romantic relationship."

"And that equates to female because?" Steve pressed, "There is more than one type of relationship."

"But you're Captain America… You're from the forties."

"We had sex back then. We had homosexuals back then too. We just didn't talk about it." Steve fired back, "We didn't talk about a lot of things back then. Didn't mean that it didn't happen. Just means we didn't talk about it. Trust me, there were quite a few bachelors "sharing the rent"… And just as many spinsters."

It was almost cute the way that Steve used air quotation marks to make his point.

"Just tell us who you are!" One of the reporters demanded, "We have a right to the truth."

“And we have a right to privacy.” Tony retorted, “Do you really want to tread on that? The private life of Captain America? He’s a National Hero. A Legend in his own lifetime.”

“Easy.” Steve’s hand automatically went to Tony’s elbow, “It’s okay. It’s just questions.”

“They don’t have the right to pry… To rehash our private lives endlessly… Till we don’t know which way is up or down.”

“Hey,” Steve pulled Tony’s helmeted head down towards his shoulder, “Not this time. Two people, one life. Remember?”

“I love you.”

“I know.”

Clint watched as Steve moved his head to a particular position. It was a subtle tell that he was listening to his comm. However, Clint couldn’t hear anything, which shouldn’t be the case as all of them were linked.

Given the fact that Tony was involved though, Clint was willing to bet that Tony had hacked the thing; just so he could have a private word with Steve.

There was a long pause, several minutes worth; it wasn’t silent, given that the Press started to demand answers to questions after a few heartbeats. However neither Steve nor Tony audibly spoke.

That wasn’t to say they weren’t speaking; Steve still had his peculiar head-tilt and was tapping the tip of his finger on the Armour in such a manner that it was likely he was communicating using Morse Code.

Finally Steve broke their silence.

“You sure?” Steve asked.

“I’ll follow your lead in this… Just like I did last time. It’s your choice. You didn’t do too badly last time.”

“Alright.” Steve nodded.

The pair of them turned towards the Press. Privately Clint felt a little cheated; he’d missed most of the argument and Steve had been tapping too quickly for him to get more than a few letters.

“Quite frankly, you need to engage your brains.” Steve declared, “Iron Man and Bucky have *just* proven that Hydra still exists; they are rooted in a great many locations and can weild a great amount of power. Revealing our identities would only paint targets on the backs of those whom we care for. Until such time as we can be *certain* that we are not increasing their risk we will not be revealing ourselves. Individual members of the Avengers are free to do so as they so choose, but do *not* count on it. You have the Right to Free Speech. However, you would be wise to remember that an indiviual’s right to swing their fist stops where another person’s nose begins.”

Steve finished, turned back to Tony and deliberately stepped forward onto the boots.

“Let’s go home.” Steve smiled.

“As you wish.”

Chapter End Notes

Finished! I know it’s a little open-ended, but that’s where the conclusion needed to be for me. And it’s been difficult to get it here. Admittedly some of that was my fault, I started playing Avengers Academy, a scarily addictive game, even without all of its features.

I hope you all enjoyed the ride.

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